

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or anything else that you recognise.

A/N Well, I'm finally back people! Sorry to have kept you waiting but I had exams and was really busy. That and the fact that I was just too lazy to bother using my worthless imagination to think up a sequel to my first fic.

Anyway, I also want to welcome back my *wonderful* beta-reader, Jeni Black. Round of applause everyone! (Claps madly and wolf-whistles)

Well, that's it from me, now on with the story.

Chamber of Secrets: Slytherin Style!

Chapter 1

"Dudley, pass the ice-cream."

"Dudley, change the channel."

"Dudley, get me another drink."

Harry Potter was, for the first time in his short life, enjoying his summer holidays. Coming back from Hogwarts after his 1st year of school, he had resolved to never let his relatives order him around as they had done for the past eleven years of his life. To accomplish this rather impressive feat (his relatives had always treated him as their personal slave and they definitely wouldn't change without a lot of persuasion) he had immediately begun to intimidate his miserable family with the few things at his disposal. One principal advantage was the fact that Harry's so called 'family' was unaware that he was forbidden to use magic out of school. Since Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were scared stiff of "that freakish mumbo-jumbo" and would do anything to prevent the neighbours from discovering their shameful secret, after a few threats they were sufficiently cowed. Any further protests on their part were immediately quelled by one purple-eyed glare from Harry's pet snake, Nemesis. Nemesis, or Isis as she preferred to be called, was more than happy to oblige her friend and would follow the Dursleys around the house, hissing menacingly.

Once the Dursleys were suitably intimidated, they were at Harry's beck and call 24-7. Harry spent his days lazing around the house, occasionally doing some homework or practising his karate. He had also gently persuaded Aunt Petunia to give him some money (all the while making sure his wand was in view) and had happily squandered it all on decent clothes and pizza. For the most part, the Dursleys stayed out of his way. Aunt Petunia was always out visiting friends and Uncle Vernon seemed to live in the office. Only Dudley was around for a longer amount of time, his hate of exercise outweighing his hate of Harry, so he stayed at home and was forced into doing Harry's bidding. The Dursleys rued the day that "abnormal boy" and his "freak snake" came back from that "horrible school." Harry, on the other hand, was, understandably, taking vicious enjoyment from his relative's plight and felt smug satisfaction at the knowledge that he was making their worthless lives hell.

The only blight on Harry's otherwise amusing holidays was his friends. It was his 12th birthday, and yet he had received no cards, no presents and he would be spending the evening upstairs pretending he didn't exist.

Earlier that morning, while the Harry and the Dursleys were eating breakfast, Uncle Vernon had cleared his throat importantly and said,

"Now, as we all know, today is a very important day," he paused for dramatic effect, then continued. "This could well be the day I make the biggest deal of my career."

Harry rolled his eyes in annoyance. Uncle Vernon was talking about a stupid dinner invitation. He'd been obsessing about it for a fortnight. Some rich builder and his wife were coming to dinner and Uncle Vernon was hoping to get a large order of drills from him.

"I think we should run through the schedule one more time," said Vernon. "We should all be in the position at eight o'clock. Petunia, you will be-?"

"In the lounge," said Petunia promptly. "Waiting to welcome them graciously into our home."

"Good, good. And Dudley?"

"I'll be waiting to open the door." Dudley put on a foul, simpering smile. "May I take your coats Mrs and Mr Mason?"

"They'll love him!" cried Aunt Petunia rapturously, while Harry faked being sick. Honestly, nobody could be so gullible as to fall for this staged reception.

"Excellent, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon. Then he rounded on Harry with a vicious glare on his face. "And you?"

Harry just raised an eyebrow at his uncle, who suddenly changed his threatening stance and instead said, "I mean, uh, where will you so graciously be tonight?" with what obviously was supposed to be a smile on his face, but which looked more like a grimace to Harry.

"I'll be in my luxurious bedroom, trying to be silent so as not to disturb your exalted guests downstairs," said Harry passively, while inwardly smirking. Unfortunately, none of the Dursley's acknowledged Harry's attempt at sarcasm, probably because they were too thick to understand words of over one syllable.

"Right, yes, um, very good," choked out Uncle Vernon, red with indignation at having to praise his worthless nephew. "Well, anyway, we should aim to slip in a few compliments at dinner. Petunia, any ideas?"

"Oh, *do* tell me where you bought you dress Mrs Mason, it looks incredibly elegant."

"Excellent, and Dudley?"

"We had to write an essay on our hero for school and I wrote about *you* Mr Mason."

This was too much for both Harry and Aunt Petunia. While Petunia bust into tears, flinging her arms round Dudley's neck, Harry decided he had to get away from his relatives if he didn't want to die of laughter. He slipped out of the kitchen and ran up the stairs to his room, wondering just how stupid the Dursleys were. They just didn't seem to grasp the fact that compliments should not be preplanned. They also did not seem to realise that just looking at Dudley's fake

simper would be enough to scare away even the bravest of guests. Harry would be very much surprised if the Masons stayed longer than half an hour.

Opening the door to his room, all thoughts of the Dursleys left his mind. There was something sitting on his bed. Harry stared in shock until outrage removed any feeling of surprise. This was his room. How dare a misshapen rat jump up and down on his bed!

Harry managed not to shout out in anger, but it took a lot of self-control. The little creature on the bed had large, bat-like ears and bulging green eyes the size of tennis balls. Whipping out his wand, Harry eyed it warily. While he was pissed off at the creature's audacity to bounce around his room as if it owned it, Harry was not so reckless as to yell at it without knowing if the thing was dangerous or not. It looked harmless but appearances could be deceptive. Instead he said, in a calm voice, "What the hell are you?"

After hearing Harry's voice, the creature whipped round, slipped off the bed and bowed so low that the end of its long thin nose touched the carpet. Harry noticed that it was wearing what looked like an old pillow case, with rips for arm and leg holes.

"Harry Potter!" said the creature in a high-pitched voice. "So long has Dobby wanted to meet you sir. Such an honour it is."

"Thank you," said Harry, still suspicious but slightly mollified by the respect the creature was showing him. "But please answer my question. What the hell are you?"

"I is Dobby, sir. Dobby the house-elf."

"Really?" Harry had read about house-elves but the book hadn't been very informative. All it said was that house-elves were servants that were bonded to a wizarding family for life. "Well, Dobby, could you be so kind as to tell me why you are running around my room, which, by the way, is private."

"Dobby is sorry sir, but he has come to tell you, sir... it is difficult... Dobby wonders where to begin, sir."

“Start at the beginning of course,” said Harry abruptly. He was getting seriously annoyed at the creature's inability to form a comprehensible sentence. Also, the way it was referring to itself in third-person all the time was seriously freaking him out.

“Dobby serves a family of wizards, sir and my master is not knowing Dobby is here, sir. Dobby has come here in secret to tell Harry Potter a thing that is very important, sir. Dobby will have to iron his hands for coming, sir, but Dobby knows it is worth it, sir.”

“Iron your hands?” echoed Harry, shocked.

The little elf nodded glumly. “My master is very strict, sir. Sometimes he...” Suddenly, without warning, the creature leapt up and started bashing its head against the wall.

“What the hell do you think you're doing? Stop it! You'll dent the wall!” yelled Harry, grabbing the elf and pulling it away. *What the hell did I do to deserve this,* wondered Harry. *I'm already stuck here with the Dursleys, and now I have a freak elf who's into self-harm running around and wrecking the furniture.*

“Dobby is sorry, sir. Dobby had to punish himself. Dobby almost spoke ill of his family, sir.”

“Why is that such a big deal? Anyway, what family do you serve?” asked Harry curiously.

The elf immediately looked guilty and said, “Dobby can't say, sir.”

“Whatever, just tell me what is so important and then leave,” said Harry, exasperated. Getting information out of the house-elf seemed close to impossible.

“Dobby has come to tell Harry Potter that he cannot go back to Hogwarts. It's too dangerous, sir.”

“What! Not go back? Stay *here* all my life? No fucking way! And what about my friends? If it's so bloody dangerous then they'll need help.”

“Oh, Harry Potter is brave and noble, but he must not go back. He must save himself. Dobby has heard young master say that you are a good friend, but Dobby never dreamed that the mighty Harry Potter could be so courageous!”

Harry was liking the elf less and less every second. To be called brave and noble was to any self-respecting Slytherin the worst possible insult. The elf made him sound like a dumb Gryffindor! And what did it mean when it said that its young master had talked about him. The only people that Harry knew who would talk about him in a favourable way were other Slytherins, (he didn't have many friends in other houses.) and they would never call him “courageous”. For a slytherin, being called a sneaky bastard would be a compliment. In fact, Harry didn't know any people outside of his own house who could even afford a house-elf. You had to be really rich, like the Malfoys... it clicked.

“you're Draco's house-elf!” exclaimed Harry.

The creature looked even more guilty and seemed to be struck dumb with terror. With one last squeak it disappeared with a loud “crack!” leaving a pile of letters behind it. Bending down, Harry saw that they were all addressed to him from his friends.

“That elf's been stealing my mail!” raged Harry. “If I ever see it again it will seriously regret it.”

He then settled down to read the letters and plot revenge.

Chapter 2:

Harry soon forgot his irritation, however, when he read through his letters. There were the expected ones from Draco and Blaise, but also a couple from Fred and George Weasley. Neville Longbottom had also, surprisingly, sent a birthday card and Harry couldn't decide if that was a good thing or not. He didn't want the clumsy boy clinging to him the whole school year, but he wouldn't mind making friends with him. As he read what his two best friends had written, he grew extremely nervous. The tone of Blaise and Draco's letters became increasingly irritated, and Blaise had threatened to send him a charmed package that would turn his skin bright orange if he didn't reply soon. Harry wasn't so frightened about his change in skin colour, as he hardly ever went outside his room. However, he was nervous of other side effects the charm might have. Blaise had a gift of turning even the most benign charms into death-threatening curses. In her charms exam, she had enchanted a pineapple to rampage around the room and charge repeatedly into Professor Flitwick before blowing up in his face. And it had honestly been an accident.

Harry scribbled a hasty reply to both Blaise and Draco (who had merely threatened to send him a Howler) assuring them that he had not intentionally ignored them and begging humbly for Blaise's forgiveness. Harry then turned to the twins' letters. After watching them warily for a couple of minutes (Harry knew Fred and George well enough to be suspicious of anything they sent), he decided to get it over with. Opening an envelope and pulling out the parchment inside, Harry was happy to note that he had not changed colour, sprouted feathers or in any other way changed. He wondered why the twins had passed up a chance to prank him, but the letter answered his questions. Fred and George had written to tell him that he had been "cordially invited" to stay for a couple of weeks at their house and would not be given any chance of declining. The twins were going to arrive at around 12 o'clock that night to escort him back to the Burrow. That meant that they would have ample time to prank him in person.

The Dursleys were utterly relieved when Harry informed them of the twins' arrival, and were in a great rush to get him out of the house. Aunt Petunia offered to help him pack and Uncle Vernon asked if he

could Drive Harry somewhere more convenient, no doubt fearing their neighbours' reactions if "that lot" came to the Dursley's front door.

So, after packing all his things and bullying Dudley one last time, Harry was ready and waiting when the specified time arrived.

What Harry wasn't sure about was how the twins were arriving. Their letter was not very informative, being full of jokes and little else, so Harry was left guessing. After going through all the possibilities in his head (apparation, floo powder, broomsticks etc) and dismissing them as being illegal or impractical, Harry was left without a clue. However, he didn't have long to find out. Hearing the sound of an engine followed by shouting, Harry looked outside and was met with a sight of utter confusion.

An old turquoise car was hovering in mid-air, around 20 feet off the ground. Fred (or George) was hanging on from it with one hand, swinging about wildly, while George (Or Fred) was frantically twisting the steering wheel, narrowly missing a lamppost. To add to the chaos, the car kept blinking in and out of existence, sometimes leaving Fred (or George) apparently hanging in mid-air.

/Okay, thissssss provessss it/ hissed Isis. /Thossssse two are officially insssane./

/Can't argue with you there/ replied Harry, watching in amusement as Fred bashed into a tree. /But remember, hide out of sight of the other Weasleys. Only Fred and George know about you, and even then they don't know I can speak Parseltongue./

/Yeah, yeah, you've told me that hundredssss of timesss. I'm not featherbrained like that bird of yours/ hissed Isis huffily, glaring evilly at Hedwig. /Or your friends/ she added, after turning back to Fred and George.

After almost crashing another 4 times George (or Fred) finally managed to manoeuvre the car to touch down in the middle of the garden, squashing Aunt Petunia's precious flowerbeds. Fred (or George) landed sprawling in an undignified heap beside it. Jumping to his feet Fred (or George) said cheerfully,

“Hi mate! Hop in!” as if it was perfectly natural to fly around England in an invisible Ford Anglia.

“Well, don’t just stand there!” called whichever twin was behind the steering wheel. Shaking off his surprise, Harry grinned back and started heaving his trunk into the car. After all his things were safely stowed away, Harry jumped in and George (who under close inspection really was George) accelerated out of the Dursley’s front gate (knocking over even more flowers on the way.)

Just as they were preparing to take off, the Dursleys crept cautiously outside to see what all the commotion was about. Seeing her destroyed flowerbeds, Aunt Petunia let out a high-pitched wail while Uncle Vernon mustered enough courage to shake his fist angrily at his departing nephew. Harry just waved airily at his Uncle, while George slammed his foot down and the car suddenly shot upwards.

“See you next summer!” yelled Harry to the shrinking forms of his odious relatives.

“So- what’s the story, Harry?” asked Fred impatiently, as he unlocked Hedwig’s cage. “Why didn’t you answer any of our letters?”

“We thought it was your Slytherin git side taking over,” put in George, swerving round a stray eagle that squawked indignantly at them.

“I never received any of the letters. A house-elf nicked them,” explained Harry, and told them all about Dobby and his crazy warning.

“Very fishy,” said George finally.

“Definitely dodgy,” agreed Fred. “Are you sure Malfoy didn’t just send his house-elf as a twisted joke?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” replied Harry. “Draco would never plan something that could be traced back to him. He is way too subtle for that.”

“Well, I guess you know the sneaky bastard better than we do,” admitted Fred. “I definitely wouldn’t trust him, though. His father, Lucius Malfoy, was a big supporter of you-know-who.”

“So?” said Harry dismissively. Seeing the twins staring at him incredulously he sighed and continued. “Look, there are loads of Slytherins that have deatheater parents. There are at least four in my year alone. But that doesn’t mean that they themselves support the Dark Lord.” Seeing that the other two were still sceptical Harry said, “Let’s change the subject. You’ve been brought up too Gryffindorish to understand a Slytherin’s point of view.”

“Fair enough,” said George, shrugging. “So, what do you think about staying with us for the rest of the holidays? Ron’s visiting a friend of his, Seamus Finnegan, for the next two weeks, so he won’t be there acting like a complete prat.”

“Sounds great. Anything is better than the Dursleys,” said Harry, stretching out in the back seat, ignoring Isis’ hiss of annoyance as she was dislodged from around his neck.

“Percy will also be out of our way. He’s been spending a load of time shut up in his room. Hardly ever comes out except for meals. He hardly gloated at all when his OWL results came. Something must be seriously wrong,” said Fred, not sounding very concerned.

“Percy is the one in sixth year, right?” said Harry.

“Yeah, and he’s a prefect now,” said Fred with a horrified shudder.

“Oh the shame of it all!” cried George theatrically, hiding his face in his hands as if in embarrassment. This turned out to be a bad idea, though, as he let go of the steering wheel and the car plummeted down 50 feet before George gained control again.

“I can’t believe that you two managed to drive this thing without crashing or being seen.” remarked Harry. “Isn’t it illegal?”

“Well, yes,” admitted Fred. “Technically. And we had a few near misses on the way here. But no muggle actually saw us. And as for the ministry, well, what they don’t know won’t hurt them.”

“There’s the main road,” said George, peering down through the windscreen. “We’ll be there in just over ten minutes. Just as well, its getting light.”

A faint pinkish glow was visible on the horizon.

"We live a little way outside the village," added Fred. "Ottery St Catchpole."

Lower and lower went the flying car. They were nearing a tumbledown house that looked like it had once been a large stone pigsty, but extra rooms had been added here and there until it was several stories high and so crooked it looked as if it was about to collapse any second. Several fat brown chickens were pecking their way around the yard and didn't even look up as, with a slight bump and a squeal of breaks, the car hit the ground.

"Touchdown!" cried Fred happily, as they all climbed out. "Now, we'll go upstairs really quietly and wait for Mum to call us down for breakfast. Then George, you come bounding downstairs going, 'Mum, look who turned up in the night!' and she'll be all pleased to see Harry and no one need ever know we flew the car. Okay, let's go."

"Wait a second," said Harry. "Is that it? Is that your only plan?"

"Yeah, what's the problem?" asked Fred, perplexed.

"The problem is that it's crap. What happens when your mother asks how I got here for example? Or if she's already noticed your missing?"

"Well, uh... We didn't really think that far ahead," admitted Fred sheepishly.

"*Gryffindors!*" said Harry, rolling his eyes in exasperation. "Sometimes I really have to agree with Draco when he says—"

Harry never had the chance to impart some of Draco's infinite wisdom, as at that moment the twins' faces took on a greenish tinge, their eyes fixed on the house. Harry spun around.

Mrs Weasley was marching across the yard, scattering chickens, and for a short, plump, kind-faced woman, it was remarkable how much she looked like a sabre-toothed tiger.

“Ah,” said Fred

“Oh dear,” said George.

“Told you so,” said Harry.

Mrs Weasley stormed up to them, her hands on her hips, glaring from one guilty face to the next.

“So,” she said, her voice carrying the threat of momentous pain in the very near future.

“Uh, morning Mum!” said George, edging slowly behind Fred.

“Explain yourselves,” said Mrs Weasley in a deadly whisper.

“Sorry, Mum, but see, we had to-”

Mrs Weasley exploded.

Harry was convinced that the following tirade, which could be heard for miles around, would be a very effective method of torture. Prolonged exposure to Mrs Weasley’s yells was sure to send anyone mad or deaf. Probably both. Luckily, the formidable woman seemed to be directing her anger at her sons instead of Harry. That looked like it was about to change, though, as, after yelling for what seemed like hours, she finally turned towards him. Gulping, Harry took a step backwards, his Slytherin instincts screaming at him to run away, but all she said was,

“Pleased to see you, Harry, dear. Come in and have some breakfast.” She turned back to the house and Harry, who was wondering whether she had opted to poison instead of deafen him, reluctantly followed.

The kitchen was small and rather cramped. There was a scrubbed wooden table and chairs in the middle of the room and Harry sat down on the edge of his seat, looking around for another exit in case things became violent.

Mrs Weasley clattered around, cooking breakfast haphazardly and throwing dirty looks at the twins as they slunk into the kitchen and sat down next to Harry.

"I don't blame *you* dear," she assured Harry, tipping a dozen sausages onto his plate. "It wasn't *your* idea to steal an illegal car and fly it half-way across the country. Eggs?" This last was said as she waved a frying pan in his face.

"It was *cloudy*, Mum!" said Fred.

"Keep you moth shut when you're eating!" snapped Mrs Weasley, cutting Harry eight slices of bread and buttering them for him. While Fred protested Harry idly wondered if Mrs Weasley was trying to make him eat himself to death.

"More bacon, Harry?" asked Mrs Weasley.

At that moment there was a welcome diversion in the for of a small, red-headed figure in a long nightdress who appeared in the kitchen, gave a small yell, and ran out again, but not before glaring angrily at the twins.

"Ginny," said Fred in an undertone to Harry. "Our sister. She's been obsessing about you all summer."

"Bet she's annoyed with us 'cause we didn't tell her you were coming over. Probably wanted to be ready with a pen and paper for you autograph, Harry," grinned George.

"She's completely hero-struck," added Fred.

Harry wasn't entirely sure if the twins' assessment was right. Ginny seemed more afraid of him that anything else. In fact, she seemed downright terrified. Harry decided it was just because she believed Ronald who had, according to the twins, spent his entire holidays whining about Slytherins in general and Harry in particular. Apparently he kept ranting about Harry becoming the next Dark Lord or something equally ridiculous. To be on the safe side Harry made extra sure that Nemesis stayed hidden from the girl. He didn't want to make her even more frightened of him.

Over the next couple of days, however, Ginny seemed to relax a bit, although she was still wary of him. This could well have been because Fred, George and Harry had been pranking everything in sight. Even the chickens hadn't escaped unscathed.

On the second day of Harry's visit they had enlisted Ginny's help in pranking Percy Weasley. This was a highly successful venture as Percy, after eating a cupcake offered to him by an innocent looking Ginny, spent an entire day turning into an animal every five minutes. After transforming into a walrus for the 3rd time, Percy locked himself in his room and refused to come out. However, Ginny managed to take some photos of him by flying up to his window on an old Comet-Two-Sixty belonging to Fred.

What surprised Harry the most was that Ginny managed to slither her way out of any punishment or even suspicion. While Harry and the twins were relegated to weeding the garden for a whole weekend, Ginny just bust into tears. After sobbing onto a sympathetic Mrs Weasley's shoulder, claiming that she "di- didn't know the cake was sniff jinxed," and that she felt "s-so *awful* about it", her mother gave her a plate of biscuits and let her off her ordinary chores for the day. The unfairness of it all astounded Harry. But one good thing was that after this event Ginny seemed to decide that Harry was not evil incarnate and even deigned to speak to him without flinching.

Three weeks later, Harry picked his way across the minefield that was the bedroom he shared with Fred and George. The room was filled to bursting with cursed or jinxed food, cauldrons full of evil looking mixtures, and cackling twins that, every so often, caused small explosions with their so-called 'experiments'. These seemed to Harry just an excuse to create more havoc. Wandering into the kitchen, Harry sat down next to Ginny and started helping himself to some bacon.

"Letters from school," said Mr Weasley, a thin balding man who was head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office. He passed Harry and Ginny identical envelopes of yellowish parchment, addressed in green ink. "You two've got them, too," he added, as Fred and George ambled in, still in their pyjamas.

“Are you also starting Hogwarts this year?” Harry asked Ginny. At her nod he continued. “Poor teachers having to put up with *another* Weasley.”

“Bet you McGonagall will have a heart attack by the end of the year,” said Fred, grinning.

“McGonagall? Well, you may be right. I was more thinking of how Snape will react when he finds out there’s yet another one of you inept redheads,” said Harry, smirking.

“He’ll probably take off twice as many points as usual,” said George gloomily, eating some toast to raise his spirits.

Fred, who had finished his own Hogwarts letter, peered over Harry’s shoulder to look at his. “You’ve been told to get all Lockhart’s books, too!” he said. “The new Defence teacher must be a fan.”

Looking down at his school book list, Harry read,

“Second year students will require:

The Standard Book of Spells Grade 2, by Miranda Goshawk

Break with the Banshee, by Gilderoy Lockhart

Gadding with Ghouls, by Gilderoy Lockhart

Holidays with Hags, by Gilderoy Lockhart

Travels with Trolls, by Gilderoy Lockhart

Voyages with Vampires, by Gilderoy Lockhart

Wandering with Werewolves, by Gilderoy Lockhart

Year with the Yeti, by Gilderoy Lockhart

“Not very good at thinking up titles, is he?” said Harry, raising an eyebrow in mild disgust. “I really can’t take anyone who writes books called ‘Gadding with Ghouls’ seriously.”

“Lockhart sounds like a complete prat,” said Ginny decidedly. “What, he does!” she continued, seeing her mother looking at her in disapproval.

“That lot won’t come cheap,” said George, obviously deciding to help Ginny out by changing the subject. “Lockhart’s books are really expensive.”

“Well, we’ll manage,” said Mrs Weasley, though she looked worried. “We can pick up a lot of Ginny’s things second hand.”

Beside Harry, Ginny made a face of disgust while her mother’s back was turned. Fortunately, no one else saw, as at that moment an eagle owl swooped into the kitchen.

“A letter from Draco!” said Harry, slightly apprehensive. He wasn’t sure if his friend was still annoyed with him for not writing all summer. Gingerly, he picked up the letter the owl dropped on his plate and carefully opened it.

‘Harry’ it read.

‘After long consideration I have decided to accept your explanation for your lack of correspondance earlier this summer. Although I am still highly displease I-’ Here there was some meaningless scribble and then a change in handwriting.

‘Hiya Harry!! (Aka. Defeater of Voldemort, Saviour of Wizard Kind, the Boy-Who-Lived, etc.)

How are YOU!? I am so HYPER!!! Guess what!? I’ve made up my own song! It’s all about goblins living at the bottom of ponds. You know, where all the Green Gunky stuff is. Here, I’ll write it out for you- SHUT UP DRACO! Just cause *you* don’t appreciate my musical talent doesn’t mean Harry won’t!? You’re just jealous. Why am I writing this down!? Well, same to YOU!! Okay, fine. I’ll sing it to you, Harry, the next time we meet. I might even have an accompanying dance routine by then! I am on FIRE!

Can’t wait to see you again. Draco is sulking and being his usual spoilt-brat self. I mean, just cause I spilt hot chocolate, ice-cream,

and some sticky stuff I don't recognise, on his favourite set of robes doesn't mean he should act all huffy and immature-'

Here again there were some wild scribbles that looked like there had been a short, violent struggle over who held the pen.

'Well anyway, Draco's yelling at me to stop getting sidetracked and to get on with it. So, we were thinking, right, that we could sorta, you know, meet up in Diagon Alley tomorrow. So, what do you say?! Huh? Please say yes! It'll be so much FUN!!! Well, let us know!!

Goodbye! Farewell! Aurevoir! Ciao (hey! I never knew I could speak Italian!) Aufwiedersehen! Hejdå! (I think that's Swedish or Norwegian; I'm not quite s-'

The writing again changed and Draco seemed to have managed to steal the pen off Blaise.

'Just ignore Blaise, Harry. She keeps on managing to get her grubby hands on chocolate and has been completely high on sugar for her whole stay at Malfoy Manor. I don't know where she gets it from. Look, I'll be frank with you. I really need you to come tomorrow. I'm desperate! I can't stand much more of this. I haven't had a full night's sleep in weeks! (well, four days, but that's not the point.)

Blaise came over on Sunday and hasn't stopped talking once. I'm being driven insane, Harry! You're my only hope now. Everyone else runs away when faced with Blaise. (sensible of them. Wish I'd thought of that first, but it's too late now.) Please help me!

From your soon-to-be-crazy friend,

Draco.'

"Wow, Draco really does sound desperate," remarked Harry to no one in particular. "He normally doesn't ask anyone for anything. He just orders people around."

"Can I see?" asked George. Without waiting for a reply he leant over and grabbed the parchment out of Harry's hands.

“Ooh, fancy!” said George. “It’s got the Malfoy emblem on it and everything.”

“George! It’s not polite to read other people’s mail!” snapped Mrs Weasley. “Give it back at once.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Harry hurriedly, before she could start yelling again. “By the way, is it possible for me to go to Diagon Alley tomorrow? You know, to get books and stuff.”

“Of course, dear. Actually we may as well all go. That lot need to buy their school things as well,” she said, indicating Ginny, Fred, George (who was laughing hysterically at the letter) and Percy, who had just walked into the kitchen.

“Morning all,” he said briskly, pointedly sitting as far away from the twins as possible. “Lovely day.”

“Simply spiffing!” said Fred, not about to pass up an opportunity to tease his older brother. “Absolutely top-hole.”

“I like that girl, Blaise,” said George before Percy could start ranting. “Anyone who annoys that git, Malfoy is automatically at the top of my Favourite People list.”

“Do you really have a list?” asked Fred eagerly, abandoning Percy for this new topic. “Who’s at the bottom of it?”

“Shut up, that’s not the issue here,” said George, handing the letter back to Harry. “My point is that I really have to try and make friends with her sometime. I’ve met her, of course, but never really talked to her and she sounds fascinating.”

“Really, George, she’s a Slytherin!” said Percy disapprovingly.

“So is Harry,” scowled Fred. “And you don’t object to him.”

“Well, dear, Harry is not a true Slytherin,” said Mrs Weasley firmly. “I’m sure the hat just made a mistake. All the Potters have been Gryffindors for centuries.”

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. He thought that it was just Ronald that discriminated against all Slyths. He was obviously wrong. Mrs Weasley was insulting his friends, house, and, worst of all, his mother.

"I am a true Slytherin!" he exclaimed angrily, scowling across the table at Mrs Weasley.

"You can't be, dear," she said, shaking her head. "After all, you're Harry Potter, not some dark wizard!"

To Harry's consternation, Mr Weasley and Percy were nodding their heads in agreement.

"So what are you saying. That all Slytherins are pure evil?"

"It is a well-known fact that all of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's followers were from Slytherin," said Percy pompously.

"We're not saying you're dark, dear," said Mrs Weasley gently, in what seemed to Harry a very condescending tone of voice. "You must have been sorted badly."

"You are wrong," said Harry coldly. "I belong in Slytherin." He got up from the table and swept out of the door, shaking with anger. As he stormed up the stairs he heard Mr Weasley say, "The poor boy must be in denial," which just served to infuriate him even more.

How can they, thought Harry, raging. How can they believe that a quarter of Hogwarts is evil! It's insane!

As he was pacing around his bedroom he heard a knock on the door. Cautiously, Fred entered the room, closely followed by George.

"Um, Harry?" said Fred, for once serious.

"Yes!" snapped Harry in reply, still pacing.

"Just ignore our parents, they're talking nonsense," said George.

"How can I? They insulted my mother's memory. She was a Slytherin herself," said Harry bitterly, his anger ebbing away, only to be replaced by depression.

"I'm sure they didn't truly mean the things they said," said George, but he sounded doubtful.

"Yeah right. If you think that then you may as well go back to you precious Slytherin-hating, *Gryffindor* family!"

"Harry, that's ridiculous!" burst out Fred. "Look, Mum and Dad may be extreme, but Bill and Charlie aren't. *We* aren't. So stop feeling so sorry for yourself and pull yourself together. I'm sorry the subject came up; we were hoping it wouldn't, but you're blowing it way out of proportion. Why do you care what Mum, Dad and Percy think? You'll soon be able to get away from them. School is starting in just five days."

"I guess you're right," said Harry reluctantly.

"Of course I'm right," said Fred, grinning in an attempt to lighten the situation. "When have I ever been wrong?"

"How about always," said George, playing along.

"It was a rhetorical question," replied Fred, sounding miffed.

"Whatever," said George. "Now, let's stop moping around and instead go and play some Quidditch!"

"Yeah, great idea. I want to go on your Nimbus Two Thousand, Harry," said Fred.

Between the two of them, the twins managed to drag Harry out of the house and to their makeshift Quidditch pitch which was situated on top of a hill and was surrounded by trees. They were soon soaring through the air and Harry gradually forgot his anger as he pulled off a series of spectacular dives.

They missed lunch and by the time they made their way back to the house it was getting late and the sun was setting on the horizon.

They grabbed some dinner, thankfully managing to avoid the rest of the family, and then, exhausted, made their way up to bed.

/Tomorrow you'll be back with Slytherins again/ hissed Nemesis, comfortingly, from her place on his pillow. /Which I for one am definitely looking forward to. I hate having to stay silent and out of sight./

/I've noticed/ replied Harry, managing a tired grin before falling fast asleep.

Chapter 3:

Harry was currently whirling round and round at dizzying speeds. A loud roaring sound blared into his ears, green flames danced around him, and hot ash filled his eyes and mouth, making him cough and splutter, unable to breathe. Therefore it was not surprising that Harry was dizzy, bruised, aching and, most definitely, not happy. As he began to feel as if he was spinning upside down, he clamped his eyes shut in a futile attempt to pretend that he was not trapped in a seemingly endless vortex surrounded by flames, and tried to convince himself that he was certainly not about to lose the contents of his churned up stomach. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, it was not working. Just as Harry was about to completely panic and lose any sliver of rational thought left in his head, he fell, face forward, onto cold stone, his glasses shattering beneath him.

Gingerly, Harry got to his feet, wincing in pain.

"No freakin' way am I ever going to use Floo Powder again," Harry muttered under his breath, brushing soot off his clothes.

/I sssecond that notion. / hissed Nemesis from her position around Harry's neck, looking distinctly nauseous. /And thosse two redheaded doltsss ssssaid that it would be **fun**. / she said in a tone of utter disgust. Mocking a fake, hearty voice she continued, / 'Oh, don't worry; it won't be a problem. It'sss jolly exciting. You won't feel a thing.' /

/The next time I see those two, they will seriously regret saying that. No way am I going to let this pass without retaliating/ Harry replied, his eyes narrowing. /I feel cold, sore, ill, and exhausted and it's entirely their fault! /

/Well, when you take your revenge, do let me know. I want to make sure I sssee it. / spat Isis, maliciously. /No one shovesss *me* up a bloody chimney without ssserious regretting it! /

/Uh... Isis? / said Harry, uncertainly, to the bloodthirsty snake who was still spitting threats under her breath. /So sorry to interrupt your delightful plotting, but do you have any idea where we are? /

/What? / hissed Isis irritably, then she noticed her surroundings for the first time. /Hey, thisss isssn't Diagon Alley! /

/Yes, I realise that. The Dark Arts books and bloodstains all over the merchandise alerted me to the fact. / said Harry dryly.

He was standing beside a stone fireplace of what looked like a large, dimly lit wizard's shop; but nothing in here was even remotely appealing. A glass case nearby held a withered hand on a cushion, a bloodstained pack of cards and a staring glass eye. An assortment of human bones lay upon the counter and spiked instruments hung from the ceiling. Harry *really* didn't want to know what they were used for.

/I vote we get out of here asss fassst asss we can. / commented Isis, her voice holding a slightly panicked tone.

/For once I have to agree with you, / said Harry, eyeing a particularly grisly item that looked like a human brain, covered in congealed blood. /Right, let's go. /

Harry made his way swiftly and silently towards the door, but before he'd got halfway there, two people appeared on the other side of the glass. One of whom, Harry was extremely relieved to see.

"Draco! Thank Merlin you're here."

"Harry?" said his grey-eyed friend incredulously. His usual drawl seemed to have faded in shock. "I thought we decided to meet up in Diagon Alley. This place is incredibly dangerous. You can't just wander about unaccompanied. And what happened to your clothes?" Draco was eyeing Harry's soot covered top in unconcealed distaste.

"Floo Powder," Harry explained, rolling his eyes in disgust. "I fell out at the wrong gate."

"Typical. Only you could make such a mess of things, Harry," said Draco, his superior Malfoy smirk back in place. "The press would have a field day. I can just see the headlines of the Prophet: '**Boy-Who-Lived Lost Up Chimney**'."

"Funny, you really are," Harry replied, sneering.

"Glad you think so, I-" Draco was interrupted by a soft, dangerous voice from behind him. Harry had completely forgotten the second figure that had entered the shop.

"Ah, Mr Potter, I presume," drawled the tall, blond man who looked like an older version of Draco. He held out his hand towards Harry and introduced himself, although Harry already knew who he was. "Lucius Malfoy."

"Harry Potter," replied Harry, shaking hands. A closed expression was present on his face. He knew, of course, that the elder Malfoy was powerful and had once been a supporter of Lord Voldemort, and did not want to let his guard down around him. He also did not want to anger the wizard, as that would no doubt secure heavy repercussions for Draco. A Death Eater's son was not supposed to befriend the Boy-Who-Lived. "Pleased to meet you," Harry said, decidedly careful to keep his voice neutral.

"Likewise," retorted the elder Malfoy with a slight mocking tone to his voice. "So, you are a Slytherin, aren't you." It wasn't a question. "I have to admit I was quite... surprised when I heard. Although I probably should have suspected it. After all, since you look so much like your father it is highly improbable that you inherited his lack of brains as well. You are very fortunate in *that* respect."

"Some would say quite the opposite, sir," drawled Harry in reply, using his most evasive voice. He did not want to insult his own father, nor did he want to disagree with the father of his friend.

"Such as the Weasleys, I imagine." The wizard had a calculating expression on his face.

"Some of that family, no doubt, but not all," said Harry while at the same time thinking, *Shit, He knows I stayed with them. This is not good.* The Weasleys and the Malfoys had had a blood feud between them for centuries. It was virtually impossible to befriend both families at the same time.

"Hmm," The older Malfoy staring piercingly at Harry before changing the subject completely. "I take it you wish to go to Diagon Alley? If

you wait here with my son until I have finished some business in this shop, I will escort you there.”

“Thank you, sir.”

With no further comment, Lucius Malfoy swept up to the counter. A stooping man appeared behind it, smoothing grey, greasy back from his face. As the two began discussing the prices of various objects, Harry turned to Draco.

“So, do you think that went well?” Harry asked in a low voice.

“Too early to say,” Draco responded quietly. “Just try and act as Slytherin as possible. If he decides that you are like your mother he will probably not dislike you too much.”

“Oh yeah... It slipped from my mind that he was good friends with Mum,” said Harry. His mother, Lily Potter, had been in Slytherin and, despite being Muggleborn, had had a lot of influence in that house. “Well, you needn’t worry about me getting an urge to act like a chivalrous Gryffindor. A whole house full of damn Gryffindors has surrounded me for weeks and it has seriously grated on my nerves. I can’t stand their prejudices.” He pointedly ignored the hypocrisy of this statement. Slytherins were notorious for their intolerance. “They had the presumption to tell me that all Slytherins are evil, and that I was actually a true Gryffindor!” Harry ranted on to an amused Draco about all that had occurred over his stay at the Burrow. After five minutes of this, Draco’s amusement soon turned to boredom and he lazily interrupted.

“Yes, yes, I’m sure it was all very vexing for you. Now, what do you think my chances are of making the Quidditch team this year? Father promised to buy me a new racing broom, a Nimbus Two Thousand and One.”

“Well, if you want to get a Chaser position you’ll have to be bloody brilliant. Flint won’t knock Pucey or Montague off the team without a very good reason. He knows perfectly well that the two of them would murder him. Horribly. And of course, what the hell would he be thinking if he actually let someone take his position? He’d cut off his own arms before he’d do that.”

The two continued discussing Quidditch until Draco's father had finished dealing with the shopkeeper. The elder wizard swept past them without a word, leaving them to follow him - equally silent - down the twisted street of Knockturn Alley.

"So," started Harry in an undertone as they were nearing Diagon Alley. "Where's Blaise? You said that she was staying with you."

"Oh, she's going to meet us at Florean Fortesque's. She said she didn't want to go to such a dark area as Knockturn Alley, but personally, I think she just wanted to eat more ice cream."

"Sounds like Blaise," said Harry, smirking. "That girl is more greedy than Crabbe and Goyle put together. It seems to me she only lives for food and nothing else."

"Correction, she lives for food and annoying the hell out of me," grumbled Draco as they sauntered over to the ice cream shop. There was no sign of Blaise. "Where the hell has she got to now?"

"No idea," replied Harry, looking around.

"Son, I need to go to the apothecary," announced Lucius Malfoy, ignoring their search. "I will meet you in Flourish and Blotts within an hour." With that he again swept off, his cloak billowing impressively out behind him, leaving Harry to wonder if it was physically impossible for the man to just walk out normally.

"Thank Merlin he's gone. Let's grab a table and wait for Blaise. She should turn up soon," suggested Draco, walking over to a table in the far corner where there were no other people in earshot. After they sat down he continued, lowering his voice considerably. "I don't know what is wrong with my father. He has been acting very oddly as of late."

"Really, he seems normal," remarked Harry unconcernedly. "He's wandering around Dark Art shops, dresses all in black with a snake motif, and seems to strongly dislike me."

"I'm serious, Harry," said Draco, irritated. There was an undercurrent of worry in his voice that made Harry sit up and pay attention. "It's as

if he's possessed. He sometimes looks at me as if he has no memory of who I am. He doesn't recognise me. And he is acting so much... well, *colder* than usual. Distant."

"Uh, isn't he always cold and distant? He's Lucius Malfoy for Merlin's sake. I mean, err, well, wasn't he a Death Eater?" Harry said this tentatively, not sure how to breach such a private subject. Draco had never spoken of such things to Harry.

"Yes, he was," said Draco, flatly. "But that doesn't mean he acts like an evil git around his family as well. Of course, he's never affectionate or loving, but I could always sense that he cared for me, on some level at least."

"Cared? Past tense?"

"That's the thing. He doesn't seem to feel anything anymore, for either Mum or myself. We just don't seem to be of any importance. Honestly, he's completely changed. He spends his whole time locked up in his study, writing in some book. I just don't know what's wrong." Draco's mask slipped and Harry caught a glimpse of deep concern on his face. *Not good. Draco always guards his emotions. He must be truly upset to let anything slip.*

Harry opened his mouth, not really knowing what he wanted to say, but was interrupted by a woman walking over to their table. And it appeared to be not just any woman. She was... beautiful, fantastic, sexy, incredible, wonderful... All those words entered Harry's head, and all of them were dismissed as inadequate. Her hair was blonde with a reddish tinge to it. Her eyes were black and entrancing. Her body was... perfect. She was heaven. Hips swaying softly, the witch sashayed up to them and, seeing their dazed expressions, grinned. It was a particularly evil, scheming grin with an underlying hint of smug satisfaction that Harry had only seen on one other person before. He snapped out of his daze.

"Blaise!"

The woman's smirk disappeared to be replaced by a disappointed pout. "How did you know it was me?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out. Now Morph back to normal, there's no one here to see."

"Fine, you always ruin my fun," whined the woman, screwing up her face. Suddenly her features seemed to melt and swirl together, growing smaller and more pointed. Seconds later a black-haired, purple-eyed girl stood there, still pouting. This sudden transformation seemed to wake Draco from his trance, and a rather confused expression found itself onto his face.

"What, where did she go?" he said in a disappointed voice. "Blaise, did you scare her off?"

"No, you dolt. It seems your feeble brain has forgotten that I am actually a Metamorphmagus."

"That woman was *you*?" drawled Draco in unflattering disbelief.

"Yes, it was," snapped Blaise, clearly annoyed. "Now if you don't mind, I want to buy my school things." With that she flounced away, dragging Harry with her.

"So, how was your summer?" inquired Harry, deciding to stay in safe grounds. "You went to France for a couple of weeks, didn't you?"

"Yeah, it was kind-a cool. But my parents insisted on dragging me around to really boring museums and 'points of interest'. Not what I call fun. Bloody Ravensclaws."

"Well, not everyone is as uncultured as you are. All you want to do is eat, sleep, and chase after dangerous, blood-thirsty creatures," smirked Harry, dodging Blaise's elbow with a grin.

"I'm not the one that keeps the most dangerous snake in existence as a pet," said Blaise, glaring pointedly at Nemesis.

"Yes, but I can actually talk to her," replied Harry.

"I can talk to animals, too," pouted Blaise defensively.

“I meant that I can actually understand her, idiot,” retorted Harry, rolling his eyes. “Although sometimes I wish I didn’t. She never shuts up, normally.”

/I heard that, / hissed Isis, glancing up at him lazily. /You should really check if I’m awake *before* you start complaining. You won’t survive very long in this world if you don’t. /

Bickering good-naturedly amongst themselves, Harry, Blaise and Isis made their way up the marble steps of the Gringotts bank. (Draco had disappeared some time ago. They had no idea where he had gone.) After talking to one of the goblins that ran the bank, Harry and Blaise were lead off to their underground vaults. After a break-neck journey along miniature train-tracks through the bank’s many tunnels deep under the earth, they reached Harry’s vault. Looking in unconcealed glee at the mounds of gold, Harry grabbed his moneybag and began stuffing it with Knuts, Sickles and Galleons. Last year he hadn’t realised the true worth of each coin and had taken out a rather small amount of money, but this year Harry was determined not to make the same mistake. One of the ways to get to the top of Slytherin House was to flaunt your wealth and connections. As Harry didn’t have many connections, he had to settle on spending as much money as possible on extravagant, and often useless, items.

Back outside on the marble steps, after Blaise had grabbed some money from her own vault, they set off again. Before they could get very far, Fred and George, who came bounding out from a nearby joke shop, accosted them.

“There you are, Harry!”

“We were wondering when-”

“-you’d turn up. I, unfortunately, bet that you’d be lost until Monday at least-”

“-but I told Fred that it would only take you a few hours.”

“I owe him twenty Sickles ‘cause of that,” ended Fred, morosely.

“No ‘Oh Harry, we were so worried!’ or, ‘We’re so sorry for trying to get you killed’?” growled Harry in annoyance.

“Floo Powder isn’t lethal, you know,” commented George. “I thought it was a great lark.”

“Where did you turn up, anyway?” asked Fred.

“Knockturn Alley,” snapped Harry.

“*Wicked!*” said Fred and George together.

“We’ve never been allowed in,” said Fred enviously.

“Nor have I,” remarked Blaise, “But nothing as trifling as being forbidden stopped me.”

“Ah, my dear Blaise,” said Fred in an exaggerated posh voice, bowing low. “How do you do, light-of-my-life? My sweet slytherin lady?”

“Aren’t you getting a bit confused?” said George, quirking his eyebrows. “Calling any Slytherin sweet is insane, and you can’t be in Slytherin and be a lady at the same time. It’s a what’s-its-name, an oxymoron.”

“I thought that was something to do with breathing,” said Fred, frowning.

“Well, I might have got a bit mixed-up,” conceded George. “But, anyway, very nice to meet you again,” he said, turning back to Blaise.

“Thanks, George,” replied Blaise with a smirk.

“You know our names,” said Fred, gaping. “How the hell can you tell us apart?”

“Well-,” began Blaise but her reply was lost as at that moment, Mrs. Weasley bustled up, bristling in indignation.

“Fred! George! What do you think you are doing?”

“Nothing, Mum,” protested George as Mrs Weasley herded him away from the two second-years.

“We weren’t doing anything-” started Fred only to be cut off by his mother’s stern glare.

“Not another word from either of you,” she snapped, dragging the twins off towards Gringotts at a furious pace. A couple of phrases drifted back to Harry and Blaise as the three Weasleys left.

“Never been so ashamed! ... consorting with *Slytherins*...what will your father say...”

One last “But Mu-um!” reached their ears before the red-haired family were completely out of earshot.

“Charming woman,” said Blaise sarcastically. “You stayed with *them* for two weeks?”

“Three actually, but Mr. and Mrs. Weasley don’t consider me to be a true Slytherin. Apparently I’m actually a Gryffindor in disguise.”

Laughing, the two friends ambled down the winding, cobbled street, examining shop windows as they passed. Draco and Theodore Nott joined them as they wandered by ‘Quality Quidditch Supplies.’ Draco had been drooling over the new Nimbus that he was going to get and was extremely smug as a result. Theodore seemed extremely relieved to escape Draco.

“He’s been lecturing me on the abilities of that bloody broomstick ever since I met him,” he hissed in his soft voice, scowling.

“I sympathise with you,” stated Harry with a smirk at the edges of his lips. “I really do. Draco’s been all conceited and disdainful about my broom.”

“Of course I have,” said Draco, overhearing. “Mine is a superior model and-“

“So, are you going to Flourish and Blotts to pick up your new books?” Theodore asked hurriedly before the blond could start all over again.

“Yep, I haven’t got anything so far,” replied Harry, emphasizing his words to make sure Draco would get the hint.

“Well, just to warn you, there’s apparently something major going on in the shop. A book signing or something of that sort,” drawled the other dark-haired boy.

He was right. As they approached the store, they saw a large crowd jostling outside the door, trying to get in. A large banner stretched across the upper windows proclaimed in glittering, gold letters:

“GILDEROY LOCKHART

will be signing copies of his autobiography,

MAGICAL ME

Today at 12.30 – 4.30 pm”

A large photo was hanging underneath showing a blonde-haired blue-eyed wizard in fluorescent coloured robes that winked roguishly at them.

“There is no way that that man managed to defeat werewolves and vampires. He looks like a bumbling idiot,” snorted Blaise.

“Yeah, and his books don’t make any sense,” added Theodore. “In one book he wrote about how he heroically defeated a whole pack of werewolves, but he obviously forgot that werewolves are solitary animals. They do not often mix with their own kind.”

“How the hell do you know that?” asked Blaise, impressed.

“Cause Theo’s a nerd. Never see him without a book or something educational,” sneered Draco.

“You’re just pissed off cause I got a better Astronomy mark than you,” replied his dorm-mate with a self-satisfied smirk.

“Anyway, let’s start pushing our way through,” said Harry. “We’ll just buy our books and leave. I, for one, do not want my books to be

signed by a man that looks like he just came out of a Colgate commercial.”

The crowd seemed to be made up mostly of middle-aged witches who were all looking extremely flustered and were constantly re-applying their make-up. After they had jostled their way through the crowd, (earning many dark looks from the more law-abiding witches) Harry, Blaise, Theodore and Draco finally managed to grab their schoolbooks, passing some redheaded Weasleys on the way. They then had to battle their way to the cash register that, unfortunately, was right by the desk where the celebrity was sitting. Gradually, Lockhart came into view, seated at a table surrounded by large pictures of his own face, all flashing dazzlingly white teeth at the crowd. Here the crowd was at its thickest, and it was virtually impossible for the four Slytherins to squeeze their way through.

“Watch where you’re going!”

“Stop pushing!”

“Do you have no manners, young man?”

The women in the crowd were obviously determined not to let them through and the friends were getting really pissed off. When a particularly thickset woman snapped,

“You have to wait your turn!” and elbowed Draco hard in the stomach, the young Malfoy heir was officially fed up. Giving a *slightly* apologetic glance at Harry, he shouted back,

“Merlin be damned, Harry Potter wants to pay for his books so bloody well **move!!**”

The woman heard him, and stared in awe-struck silence. The rest of the crowd heard him, and began whispering excitedly. Gilderoy Lockhart heard him, looked up, and positively yelled, “Merlin! Is that Harry Potter?”

/Now would be a very good time to miraculously disappear/ hissed Isis helpfully, as every single person in the cramped shop converged down on him. *Excellent advice*, thought Harry. *But there’s nowhere to*

run to. He was cornered and had completely run out of options. He sighed in a self-suffering way. His spirits rose slightly when he saw the crowd parting, but it was only to allow Lockhart to throw himself forward, seize Harry's arm and pull him to the front. Harry eyes narrowed in anger as he glared at Lockhart who was pumping his hand up and down, a photographer dancing in front of them, clicking away madly. The crowd burst into applause.

"Smile for the camera, Harry," said Lockhart, through his own gleaming white teeth. "Together, you and I are worth the front page."

The thought of having the whole of Britain know about this incredibly embarrassing situation made Harry *really* pissed off. By this time his glare was enough to freeze hell twice over. Pulling his hand roughly from Lockhart's grasp, Harry sneered poisonously at the man, inwardly debating whether it was worth killing him outright. Eventually deciding that getting revenge on Draco was more important than torturing the idiot in front of him, Harry ineffectually tried to disappear back into the crowd. Lockhart throwing an arm around his shoulders and clamping him tightly to his side, knocking Harry's glasses askew, stopped him.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he declared loudly, waving his hand for quite. "What an extraordinary occasion this is! The perfect moment for me to make an announcement I've been sitting on for some time!" Surreptitiously, Harry reached for his wand, now completely prepared to curse Lockhart into oblivion in front of dozens of eyewitnesses.

"When young Harry came to buy my signed autobiography-"

"Get real," muttered Harry, fingering his wand and trying to decide what curse to use. Lockhart continued, oblivious.

"- which I will now present him with, free of charge -" Harry had finally settled on a bat-bogey hex, when a pile of books was rammed into his stomach, making him double over in pain.

"Harry had *no idea*, that he would soon be getting much, much more than my book, *Magical Me*."

Gods, no, thought Harry in horror, guessing where this was going.

“Yes, I am proud to announce that, this September, I will be taking up the post of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!”

Harry groaned out loud as his worst fears were confirmed. And the blithering idiot kept ranting on...

“Harry and his friends will now be taking lessons from me, the most talented and knowledgeable wizard in Europe.”

After this *modest* speech (note sarcasm), the newest, and most probably worst, Hogwarts Professor shoved Harry back into the crowd, leaving him to stagger back to his friends, weighed down by the entire works of Gilderoy Lockhart. What he found when he got there did not improve his mood. Blaise was practically rolling around on the floor in hysterics, Theodore was looking extremely amused (but was too well-bred to be quite as blatant about it as the hyper Metamorphmagus.) and Draco was trying, but spectacularly failing, to look contrite.

“You git,” growled Harry, dumping his books down on top of Blaise. “You slimy, disgusting, miserable *maggot*.”

“Come on, Harry,” said Draco, beginning to look a bit nervous. “If I hadn’t said anything we would still be stuck in that queue. This way, you get publicity, you get out of this blasted shop without fighting through a crowd, *and* you get a free set of books. Don’t you admit it’s worth it?”

“I was mobbed, I was hit by the equivalent of half a library, and I had to endure skin-contact with Lockhart,” said Harry flatly.

“Well, yes,” spoke Draco. “But the books that you were hit with were free. Remember that.”

“I don’t want any freakin’ books!” yelled Harry.

“The Code of Conduct rule #37 clearly states: If fortune has presented you with an unexpected opportunity which you don’t really deserve, the last thing you should do is correct the mistake,” put it Theodore, calmly.

“Okay, fine, I’ll keep the books,” conceded Harry reluctantly. “But I’m still going to harbour a grudge against you, Draco, until I take my revenge.”

“First of all, it’s more effective if you don’t actually *tell* your enemy what you plan on doing,” drawled Blaise, who had finally stopped laughing. “And second, don’t you think he’ll be punished enough by having Lockhart as a teacher?”

“That imbecile wouldn’t last a year,” snorted Harry. “He’s a self-obsessed prat whose only topic of conversation is himself.”

“Too true,” drawled Draco, his composure back now that he wasn’t in imminent danger of being hexed. “We’ll just have to make sure that he doesn’t stay more than a year. I’ll talk to my father about it, he’s on the School Board of Governors.”

“Good idea,” remarked Theodore. Then, looking over Draco’s shoulder, he said, “Angry red-heads at 2 o’clock,”

“Well this will be fun,” drawled Harry maliciously. Ronald Weasley was storming towards them, his fists clenched by his sides, Ginny trailing along behind him.

“What the hell was that, Potter?” he snapped.

“Uh, what the hell was what?” replied Harry, slightly confused. He hadn’t even spoken to the boy in over two months.

“Oh, don’t act all innocent with me. Bet you loved that, didn’t you. All the attention, the photographs, the free stuff,” said the redhead bitterly. “The famous Harry Potter is too important to pay for things like the rest of us.”

“Look, Weasley, I’m not bloody interested in your insecurities,” sneered Harry. “If you’re so poor that you need hand-outs, that’s your problem, not mine.”

Ronald turned red from embarrassment and was obviously trying to formulate a reply, when Draco caught sight of Ginny.

“Red hair, freckles, patched robes,” he drawled. “You must be yet another Weasley, or is she your girlfriend, Ronald? If your family was inbred it would explain a lot.”

At this Ron launched himself towards Malfoy, but was met with a wand pointed straight at him.

“Don’t touch me, Weasley,” sneered Draco. “You probably have fleas, living the way you do.”

“Ron!” called Mr. Weasley, struggling over with Percy. “What are you doing? It’s mad in here, let’s go outside.”

“Well, well, well – Arthur Weasley.” It was Malfoy senior. He stood behind Draco, sneering in just the same way.

“Where did he come from?” whispered Blaise to Harry. Harry shrugged in reply. The elder Malfoy seemed to have appeared out of nowhere.

“Lucius,” said Mr. Weasley, nodding coldly.

“Still as decrepit as ever, I see,” drawled Mr. Malfoy, his eyes lingering on the frayed cuffs of the redheaded wizard’s robes. “With all these raids, you would think the ministry would pay you over time, but obviously not.” Idly, he picked up a Transfiguration book from Ginny Weasley’s cauldron and flicked through it. “Second-hand, what a disgrace.”

Mr Weasley flushed, but tried to defend himself. “Your idea of disgrace is obviously not the same as mine, Malfoy.”

“So I have noticed,” replied the elder Malfoy with a smirk. “No self-respecting pure-blood would behave as you do. And now, as entertaining as this has been, Arthur, my son and I must return home. Come Draco.” Laying his hand on Draco’s shoulder, he steered him outside, pausing only to throw the schoolbook in his hand back at Ginny.

After he left, the Weasleys gathered together to loudly complain about Lucius Malfoy and to try to soothe their damaged egos.

“Well, that was amusing,” said Blaise brightly. “Lucius Malfoy may be an obnoxious bastard, but he does have a certain flair for insults.”

“I have to agree,” said Theodore, permitting himself a grin. “But unfortunately, I, too, have to leave. I told my parents I’d be back by two o’clock.”

“Well, see you in school then,” said Harry.

“So, what are you going to do now?” asked Blaise after the young Nott had left. “Are you still going to stay at the Weasleys?”

“Looks like I’ll have to,” replied Harry morosely.

“How about staying at the Leaky Cauldron with me? I’m renting a room until school starts.”

“Really? I’d love to, but first I actually want to buy the rest of my school things. So far I’ve only got the Lockhart books and that’s it.”

After another two hours of shopping (of which Harry spent one and a half buying robes under the direction of Blaise), the two friends made their way back to the Leaky Cauldron. Once there, a sleep-deprived Harry was forced to listen to a hyperactive Blaise (who had eaten too much sugar) babble on until three o’clock in the morning, mentally yelling at himself for not barricading the door when he’d had the chance.

Chapter 4

At the sound of his alarm clock, Harry blearily sat up in bed and looked around in slight confusion. This was not his usual method of waking up. He was not cold, wet, hexed, or squashed flat, and there was a noticeable lack of his hyped-up-on-sugar friend. Gradually, realization dawned. The impossible had occurred. Harry had *willingly* woken up before Blaise.

At school Harry was always the last down to breakfast, and was never properly awake until lunchtime. During the holidays (when he was not prodded awake by Blaise) he woke up no earlier than midday. Blaise, on the other hand, was the complete opposite. She was one of those extremely irritating people who were energetic and bouncing after a 50 kilometer run at two o'clock in the morning. Normally, Blaise got up at around 7, and was poking, shaking or pouring cold water over Harry before the clock struck eight.

Therefore it was with a worried expression on his face that Harry went to investigate the deviation from this early morning schedule. Reaching the door to Blaise's room, he knocked and then, hearing a muffled moan in reply, crept in. Blaise was still in bed.

"Blaise, are you alright?" asked Harry in concern, peering at her. He heard a mumble in reply. "Are you ill?"

No answer.

"Look, we really need to get ready," said Harry slightly impatiently. Today was September the first, the day the Hogwarts Express left to bring them to school. It was the reason that Harry was up at all.

"I don't wanna go!" wailed Blaise in protestation.

"Oh come on, it'll be fun!" said Harry in a happy, cheerful voice that was specifically calculated to annoy her.

"That's easy for you to say. You're not going to get detention the first day back for not doing your homework. I'm not going," said Blaise flatly, and buried her head under the cover.

“Think of all the Hufflepuffs you can torture,” wheedled Harry.

Slowly, Blaise’s head emerged and she looked cautiously at Harry.

“I’m listening.”

It took another five minutes, in which Harry shamelessly bribed her with chocolate frogs and tempted her with the thought of being able to use magic, to get Blaise to emerge from her room. One hour later, after a leisurely breakfast and hurried last minute packing, the two Slytherins were ready to leave. There was just one tiny problem.

They had decided, well, Blaise had decided, that they were going to travel by Floo Powder, and Harry was having serious doubts about it.

“Just step into the fire.”

“No.”

“It’s easy, just put one foot in front of the other, like this.”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“Pretty please?”

“No.”

“Get into the damn fire! NOW!”

“Erm, no.”

Sighing in frustration, Blaise glared at her friend who was eyeing the fireplace with a look of mistrust.

“It’s simple. Just speak clearly.”

“I’m not doing it. What if I end up in Knockturn Alley?”

“Either you take that risk, and get to Hogwarts, or you’ll stay stranded here and will have to go back to the Dursleys for the next six years. It’s your choice,” said Blaise in a sickly sweet voice.

“Aww, that’s unfair, bringing them up,” whined Harry, defeated. “Remember, if I end up dead or maimed, it’s your entire fault.”

Rolling her eyes in annoyance, Blaise pushed him towards the fireplace. Stepping into the green fire, clutching his suitcase to him, Harry yelled out, “Kings Cross station!” and was gone in a flash of flames.

As it turned out, Harry turned up in the right place, fully intact, a couple of minutes later, looking distinctly nauseous.

“Told you nothing would happen,” said Blaise smugly, appearing behind him.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Harry choked out, turning slightly green.

“Well, just make sure to turn the other way when you do,” replied Blaise absently, looking around for a trolley.

They had appeared in a side room in the main station, to avoid being seen appearing in a fireplace by muggles. Once they had nicked a trolley from a young first year (judging by his appearance) and lugged their trunks onto it, the two twelve year olds pulled open the only door in the room, and entered the main departure hall. As they pushed their way through the crowds towards platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$, they saw a few other Hogwarts students from different years.

“There’s Millicent Blustrode,” shouted Blaise over the noise, pointing at a large, thick-set girl who was glaring at a young boy next to her. “Hmm, maybe we shouldn’t say hello... she doesn’t look that happy,” continued Blaise, as Millicent clubbed the boy over the head.

“I agree,” said Harry dryly.

“Look, there’s Draco,” said Blaise excitedly, jumping up and down, then shrieked, “DRACO! Hi! Over here!”

“Blaise, shut up!” growled Harry as the whole platform turned to stare at them. Blaise, however, carried on regardless.

“Fine, I’ll leave you to it then,” said Harry with a sigh, and strolled off towards the boundary between platforms nine and ten. Surreptitiously leaning against the wall, he readied himself to fall through. Nothing happened. Frowning, Harry leaned a bit harder. Still nothing happened. Abandoning all attempts at stealth, Harry began banging into the wall, Aimee screeching at him from her cage.

“Potter, what the hell are you doing?” drawled a familiar voice.

Turning around Harry saw Draco and Blaise looking at him in amusement and curiosity. Behind them, anyone within a 50 meter radius was staring at him in consternation.

“Hmph, and you said I was drawing too much attention,” sniffed Blaise.

“I didn’t say that, I only thought it, and I have a good reason for acting like this. The damn wall is-”

“Ah, Draco, there you are.” It was Lucius Malfoy. “I am leaving now; I trust you will be able to install yourself on the train without my help. I will no doubt see you during the next holidays.” With that, he turned and strode off without as much as a parting nod or smile.

“See, told you he’s acting all cold,” said Draco.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Harry, not in the mood to discuss Lucius Malfoy’s eccentricities. “As I was saying before I was interrupted, I can’t get through the damn wall!”

“What?” said Blaise. “I saw two seventh years go through just before you tried. You must have done something wrong.”

“All you have to do is walk straight into it. That doesn’t leave much room for error, Blaise,” snapped Harry.

“Well, let’s try again then,” drawled Draco, and leant into the wall. Half his body passed straight through it. “Well, looks like you were wrong,” he said smugly.

“I swear, it was blocked,” said Harry, irritated.

“Well, it isn’t now, is it?” pointed out Blaise. ‘So let’s hurry up and go through.”

Grumbling, Harry followed the other two through to the platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$, confused and annoyed that his friends didn’t believe him.

After heaving their trunks onto the train and finding an empty compartment, the three friends settled down, glancing out of the window now and then to watch all the students.

“I wonder what the new first years will be like,” said Blaise, thoughtfully.

“No idea, haven’t met any of them apart from Ginny Weasley,” replied Harry.

“Worthless Gryffindors like her don’t count. All Weasleys are a waste of space,” sneered Draco. Harry just rolled his eyes in response.

“Don’t you think that comment is getting old, Draco?”

“No,” responded the blonde haired boy without much preamble. “The Weasleys’ stupidity is endless, and therefore I will never stop mocking them.”

“Well, I’m off to do a bit of mingling with the other houses,” said Blaise, cheerfully, standing up.

“Since when do *you* talk to Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors?” asked Draco disdainfully. Blaise just grinned at him and slipped out of the door without giving him an answer. “She’s up to something,” announced Draco, staring after her in suspicion.

“Of course she’s up to something,” replied Harry impatiently. “Slytherins always are.”

"Who's up to something?" It was Louisa Feral, a Slytherin in the same year as the two boys. With her was a third year that Harry vaguely recognized as Vanessa Niente, a rich and incredibly snobbish pureblood slytherin.

"Ah, Louisa! How was your holiday?" said Draco smoothly, ignoring her question.

"Bloody awful," she replied, sitting down next to Harry. "I had to put up with my cousin for two whole months. That boy has a brain the size of a peanut."

"Won't you sit down?" Harry politely asked the third year who was standing haughtily at the entrance of the compartment. After giving him a calculating look, as if trying to evaluate whether he was beneath her notice or not, she finally sat down with a small nod in Harry's direction.

"So, cousin how was your holiday?" asked Draco, his face completely devoid of any sneer.

"You two are cousins?" asked Harry in astonishment.

"Yes," responded Vanessa Niente in a tone quite similar to Draco's. "We are second cousins once removed, on our fathers' sides. One should always know these things, family connection are important, are they not, Draco?"

"Indeed," replied Draco, calmly, while Harry tried to hide his surprise at the way the girl spoke.

"In answer to your question," continued Vanessa Niente, "My holiday was adequate. My father insisted on my studying defense spells throughout the duration of my stay at home, as he was of the opinion that I would learn nothing in that area this year."

"Well, I certainly agree on that," said Harry, thinking about Lockhart in disgust. "The man is an utter fool. Have you read the book titles?"

"Yes, they're dire, aren't they," Louisa nodded in agreement. "He's completely incompetent according to my mother. She said that he

was a few years below her at school, and was in Hufflepuff. That's the only house that would ever accept him, in my opinion."

All the Slytherins in the compartment smirked in agreement.

"Anyway, Draco, there has been a rumor circulating about certain ...events that will take place in the near future. Do you know anything?" asked Louisa, narrowing her eyes slightly.

"This is not the place to be talking of such things," hissed Vanessa Niente to her companion, frowning.

Draco did not appear to pay any attention to his cousin. He was staring at Louisa with an expressionless face.

"I know nothing pertaining to this subject," he drawled languidly.

"Very well," replied Louisa, a disappointed look on her face. "Alright, I am going to go and look for Pansy. I will see you three later, at the sorting."

Nodding their heads in reply, the remaining Slytherins waited until the compartment door slid shut before turning to one another.

"She needs to learn more discretion," commented Harry, demurely.

"Yes," replied Draco.

"I know you were lying, cousin," drawled Vanessa. "Will you not consider telling me the truth?"

"No."

"Very well," said Vanessa, nodding her head in acquiescence. She seemed unsurprised. "I will take my leave. I will see you later, cousin, and it was a pleasure meeting you, Harry Potter."

"The pleasure's all mine," murmured Harry politely. In Slytherin house, one wrong word, one small slight, could lead to a deadly feud. The Slytherins were, on the whole, the politest out of all the other houses, but only when it came to other Slytherins. Allegiances were incredibly

important, and therefore, unless they were magically and politically powerful enough to survive alone, all Slytherins took care not to offend their housemates needlessly.

Once Vanessa Niente had left, there was silence between the two second years, before it was broken by Harry.

"This has something to do with your father, hasn't it?"

"Yes, it has."

"And you know, or at least suspect, what it is."

"Yes."

"But you will not tell me."

"Not at this present moment in time, no."

"Very well."

There was again a lengthy silence.

"So, where do you think Blaise went? I bet you five sickles that she'll torture at least four Hufflepuffs before we see her again," said Harry with a grin.

"Make that more like ten Hufflepuffs. You know she can never resist," smirked Draco. The atmosphere in the room relaxed considerably, and for the rest of the ride the two boys just sat and joked with one another as they usually did. This may have seemed strange to students from other houses, but it was the way Slytherin house worked. Dark, serious subjects were rarely out in the open. The Slytherins guarded their thoughts and opinions carefully, and such subjects were normally pushed down and not mentioned. The Slytherins showed an unbroken image of unity around other people and were wary of discussing important subjects with more than their extremely close friends. In fact, Slytherins who were blood enemies still talked and joked to one another in public, therefore making it virtually impossible for outsiders to ascertain allegiances in the Slytherin house. The opinion in Slytherin house was that personal,

private information should be kept just that – private. Information is power, and therefore the Slytherins endeavored to keep all knowledge to themselves, and would never disclose it unless it was absolutely necessary, and then only for a price. Non-slytherins were kept completely in the dark, and students from the house mostly had to make educated guesses. Harry knew that Draco would tell him if it was vital that he know, because, essentially, Slytherin friends always looked out for one another unless it went against their own interests.

Therefore, Harry was content to stop questioning Draco and move on to more trivial subjects, but he was planning other ways of gaining knowledge. *‘Perhaps I should talk to Blaise. She stayed with the Malfoys and maybe overheard something,’* thought Harry, while stealing a chocolate frog discreetly from under Draco’s nose.

Ooh, chocolate! Isis hissed, appearing from Harry’s sleeve and attempting to look endearing while eying the chocolate hungrily.

“Fine,” Harry grumbled. He watched as his snake chased the hopping frog across the table, Draco looking on in amusement beside him.

Finally they arrived at the station and, after changing into their robes, they all climbed out onto the platform. Seeing Neville Longbottom standing some distance away from him, Harry raised his hand slightly in greeting, getting a nervous nod back. *‘That boy really needs more confidence,’* sighed Harry to himself, before beginning to look around for Blaise. There was no time to find her, however, as they were ushered into the horseless carriages which were soon to set off. In a desperate attempt to avoid the Quidditch captain, Flint, who was determinedly making his way towards him, Harry dragged Draco into an already half-full carriage. This meant that they had to share with a sixth-year Slytherin called Daisy Thornbell and a Ravenclaw in their year by the name of Lucas Moon.

“Good day, Potter, Malfoy,” said Daisy Thornbell, nodding slightly in recognition.

Both Harry and Draco nodded in reply, and even Draco did not have a single trace of a sneer or look of superiority. Daisy Thornbell was one of the leaders of Slytherin house, and most people agreed that she was the best duelist in the whole school. She was therefore

someone that no one wanted to anger. The last person to mock her (he was a seventh year who had made some insulting comments about her name and Hufflepuff parents) ended up locking himself in his room for two whole weeks, hiding under the blankets and whimpering at anything louder than a whisper. And that was when she was in a *good* mood.

“Potter, I would like to speak to you at some point during this week,” she said, emotion clearly vacant from her tone.

“Err,” stuttered Harry, frantically searching his mind for a reason why she was asking him. Had he offended her somehow? ‘No,’ he reassured himself. *‘If I had I would be in a momentous amount of pain at this very moment.’*

“Very eloquent,” smirked Draco, raising an eyebrow at his friend. Harry just glared in return.

“Don’t fret, I’m not annoyed with you,” drawled Thornbell, permitting herself a faint smirk of amusement. “I have a proposition for you, but it needs to be discussed in private. Is it possible for us to talk tomorrow?”

“Yes, of course,” replied Harry. The sixth year just nodded in reply and then turned to look out of the small window, obviously not deigning to converse with the occupants of the carriage any longer.

After a couple of minutes of silence the Ravenclaw decided to end it by asking,

“So, Potter, how was your holiday?”

“As good as could be expected, considering the circumstances,” replied Harry civilly, although slightly surprised at the question. He did not remember talking to Lucas Moon outside classes before. “And yours?”

After five minutes of polite conversation, discussing their holidays, homework, and the ceaseless stupidity of Gilderoy Lockhart, which seemed a universal subject of conversation, the carriages finally arrived at the castle. Nodding goodbye to Lucas Moon, Harry and

Draco made their way to the castle and into the Great Hall where they sat down near the middle of the Slytherin table, soon followed by the rest of their peers.

"Hiya!" said Blaise cheerily, slipping into a seat next to Harry. "When are the ickie firsties coming; I want to eat!"

"Yes, we do comprehend that fact, Blaise," said Harry, grinning. "You're a bottomless pit when it comes to food." Blaise just beamed back at him, obviously in a good mood.

"So, how did your *mingling* go?" inquired Draco with a slight sneer.

"It was a definite success," replied Blaise with satisfaction.

"How were your holidays, Millicent?" asked Harry, turning to the girl across from him. '*How many times have I asked or answered this question?*' wondered Harry, wryly.

"Awful," she growled in reply. "My infuriating brother was annoying me the entire time. He's starting Hogwarts this year, so I won't even be able to get away from him now. Oh, look, there he is."

The first years were all filing into the Hall, staring around in awe, and led by McGonagall. Harry looked to where Millicent was pointing, and saw the boy he had seen next to her at the station. He was smirking and looking incredibly confident compared to most of the other eleven year olds. As McGonagall placed the old, dirty, patched Sorting hat on a stool, silence fell over the student body. People stared expectantly at the hat, and a tear near the brim opened, and it broke into song. As the words echoed round the hall, Harry and his friends were examining the new students. Almost all of them looked terrified.

"The Sorting will now begin," said the strict deputy headmistress, unrolling a scroll of parchment. "When I call your name, you will come and try on the hat." The first-years fidgeted nervously.

"Baddock, Aunja!"

A short, blonde girl stepped forward, and composedly walked towards the hat.

"5 sickles she'll be a Ravenclaw," drawled Draco.

"I'll take you up on that," said Harry, who had seen the girl sneer at some muggleborns at the station. "She'll be a Slytherin."

"SLYTHERIN!" shouted the hat, and the girl walked towards her new house table amidst polite clapping.

"Here," growled Draco, handing over the silver coins to a smirking Harry.

"Ah, I love being right," said Harry as McGonagall called out "Bulstrode, Ian."

"Slytherin," said Blaise immediately.

"Definitely," put in Millicent, while the other Slytherin students nodded in agreement. Everyone knew the Bulstrodes were all Slytherins.

"Slytherin!" shouted the Hat, and the newest member walked towards the table with a self-satisfied smirk on his face and sat down near Harry and his classmates, next to the other first-year.

"Thank Merlin he's not sitting next to me," said Millicent, pleased with the seating arrangements, as there were two people between her and her brother.

"Family love is so important, don't you think?" drawled Pansy sarcastically.

"Creevey, Colin!"

"What do you think? Hufflepuff?" speculated Theodore Nott.

"Nah, my guess is maybe Gryffindor," said a tall fourth-year sitting near him.

"I agree with you there, Galen. He's definitely a Mudblood, though," said Draco. "He was incredibly shocked to see ghosts when he entered the hall."

"GRYFFINDOR!" shouted the hat.

Four names later, Harry was 13 sickles richer and Blaise was looking incredibly smug because she had won 21 sickles from Draco over the placement of Cordelia Maxwell, who became a Hufflepuff.

“Dell, Christina” became the first Ravenclaw and, up and down Slytherin table, money again changed hands. It had become a tradition to bet on house placements and Professor Snape, who was currently glaring at the Gryffindor table, turned a blind eye on the proceedings. The next six names were evenly placed.

“Pastelle, Ann” was also sorted into Ravenclaw (“Another Mudblood, I don’t recognize the name,” said Daniel Galen) and a couple of names later “Virginia, Weasley!” was called out, and the typically red-haired girl stepped forward, watched by her brothers.

“Gryffindor,” heard Harry from every Slytherin within hearing distance.

“There’s no point even betting on that one,” said Pansy in a bored tone of voice, leaning back in her chair.

“Slytherin,” said Harry.

“What!”

“She’s going to be in Slytherin,” said Harry confidently.

“How can you be so sure, you don’t even know the girl,” said Louisa Feral.

“Yes I do, enough to know where the Hat’ll put her,” replied Harry.

“Even so, no Weasley has ever been in Slytherin,” pointed out Theo.

“No Potter has either,” retorted Harry.

“Well, she is taking a long time,” said Louisa with some doubt creeping into her voice.

“I say two galleons she’ll be in Gryffindor,” drawled Pansy. The rip on the hat opened.

“SLYTHERIN!” echoed through the hall. Looks of disbelief were shot towards Harry, who was extending his hand smugly.

"Told you so..."

Chapter 5:

There was stunned silence in the hall. As Harry collected his money from a dazed Pansy, he sneaked a glance at the Weasleys sitting at the Gryffindor table. They were all staring, frozen, at the front of the hall. ‘*Well, at least their not yelling or throwing things*’, thought Harry, trying to find something positive about the situation. The Slytherins began muttering to themselves and Harry caught the words, “Impossible...” “All Weasleys in Gryffindor...” “*Slytherin*” from his housemates along the table.

After a small nudge from Professor McGonnagal, Ginny unsteadily stood up and shakily removed the hat from her head. With hesitation, she slowly began walking towards her house table, her limbs moving woodenly and a shell-shocked look on her face. Harry raised his hands and began clapping, a few of his housemates half-heartedly joining in when he glared at them. Harry pulled another chair towards him and beckoned the red-haired girl over. She slipped into the seat with a grateful glance, took one look at her brothers’ faces, and burst into tears, incoherently mumbling into Harry’s shoulder. Harry was never any good at comforting people, and was starting to panic at being in such close proximity to a sobbing girl. He turned to his friends for help, but Draco, sneering in disgust, pointedly turned his back and started talking to Pansy Parkinson. Blaise was also not much help. Harry looked at her with his most pleading expression on his face, but she was staring at Ginny perplexedly and didn’t notice. Knowing that the other Slytherins were a lost cause, as they were all either ignoring or glaring at her in suspicion, Harry realized that he would have to deal with the situation himself and, sighing, cautiously patted the crying girl on the back. Five minutes later, his arm exhausted and sore, she was still bawling her eyes out and the Slytherins were beginning to look at her askance or with manipulative gleams in their eyes.

“Ginny,” hissed Harry in her ear. “You have to pull yourself together. Showing weakness is *not* an option.” Unfortunately, all he got in reply was an increase in sobs and Harry frowned in concern. If Ginny didn’t pull herself together and start to assert herself, the other slyths would ruthlessly exploit her, thinking her to be weak and an easy target. Harry did hold some sway in Slytherin, because of Quidditch and

being close friends with the Malfoy heir, but Draco was making it quite clear that he would not back Harry up in this. Harry himself might be able to keep the first, second and third-years from being outrightly cruel to the youngest Weasley for a couple of weeks, allowing her time to settle down. He could also probably get the other members of the Quidditch team, and maybe a couple of fourth-years, to leave Ginny alone, but it would be hard work, and Harry would most definitely not be endearing himself to anyone. A lot of the Slytherins had been victims to Fred and George's pranks, and were probably already plotting how to manipulate Ginny against her brothers. The other Weasley boys were also not well liked in Slytherin House. Percy's pompous behaviour grated on every student's nerves, and Ronald Weasley's prejudice and hatred against anything Slytherin was well known. Even the more tolerant Slyths hated the Weasleys. No, Ginny *really* needed to pull herself together if she wanted to survive.

"Come on, Gin, stop crying," Harry whispered desperately, trying to remember the incantation for a silencing charm to stifle her loud sobs. However, this time Ginny appeared to listen to him, and he was rewarded with her tear stained face turning towards him, but, before Harry could say anything else, a loud voice rang through the hall.

"Dear students, I am delighted to welcome you to another school year..." It was Dumbledore giving his annual speech, which Harry promptly tuned out. Giving Ginny some time to attempt to control herself, he turned and examined the new Slytherin first years, who were all listening to the headmaster's speech with quickly degenerating looks of interest.

There were only five new students this year, an unusually small amount. There were two boys, and two other girls besides Ginny, namely Aunja Baddock and Helen Vandall. This worried Harry slightly. Aunja Baddock came from a mostly Ravenclaw family, so she probably wasn't that prejudiced against Gryffindor families such as the Weasleys, but she would maybe be strongly influenced by Helen Vandall. The Vandalls were one of the most Slytherin and snobbish families in the whole of Britain. They rivalled even the Malfoys in their belief in their own superiority. The Weasleys were viewed by such families as utter disgraces, and if Helen Vandall decided to take the

same view on Ginny, she would no doubt make the red-head's life hell. So far the Slytherins were ignoring Ginny, but that probably wouldn't last for long.

With a sigh, Harry saw that Ginny was still leaking tears, allowing a small puddle to form on the table. Making another attempt at cheering her up, he said, "Slytherin house isn't that bad you know. The preconceived notion that we're all dark wizards is wrong, no matter what the Gryffindors proclaim. You'll enjoy it here in the end." His words did not have the desired affect.

"They hate me!" she wailed, bursting into fresh tears.

"Who? Other Slytherins or your family?" asked Harry, slightly confused.

Way to be tactful, Harry, hissed Nemesis from under his cloak, where she was hiding.

Shut up! She'll hear you! hissed Harry angrily out of the corner of his mouth.

Luckily, Ginny was in no state to hear the strange hissing coming from Harry's robes, and merely answered, "Both!"

"Well, your family may be a tad annoyed at first," admitted Harry, adding mentally *'that's the understatement of a century,'* seeing the glares directed at them from the Gryffindor table. "But I'm sure they'll come around, they are, after all, your family. And as for the other Slytherins; as long as you stop crying, you'll be okay. Come on, why don't you eat something."

Dumbledore had finally finished his boring speech, and food had materialized on the plates in front of them. Wiping away her tears, Ginny started helping herself to some shepherd's pie, visibly cheering up at the sight of food.

The Slytherin table was silent for the most part, some people eating quietly, while others talked in hushed voices to their neighbours. The atmosphere was oddly tense, with the older Slytherins muttering amongst themselves with curiously dark looks on their faces.

Normally the Slytherins waited until they had at least reached their common rooms before beginning to scheme amongst themselves, and Harry made a mental note to send Isis to spy in the seventh year dorm. Keeping tabs on everything was imperative to have any sort of social standing in Slytherin house.

The first years were completely silent, until Ian Bulstrode broke it by saying, "So, what's with the insane headmaster and his incredibly tedious speech?"

"Well, everybody, even his loyal Gryffindor followers, agrees that he's insane, and after tonight I definitely see their point," said Aunja Baddock with a slight sneer. "One more minute of him droning on about forbidden forests and I would be forced to do something drastic."

"You think he gives speeches often?" asked Fion O'Keith, looking suitably apprehensive.

"Oh, don't worry, apparently it's only a start-of-term thing," assured Ginny, suddenly speaking up. Harry looked at her, pleasantly surprised, while the other first years stared at her with speculative looks on their faces.

"Well, that's good to hear," replied Helen Vandall, finally. Then, leaning across the table towards Ginny, she held out her hand and stated "Helen Vandall, of the ancient and noble house of Vandall."

"Virginia Weasley," replied Ginny, firmly shaking the proffered hand. Immediately, the other first years began introducing themselves to each other, while Harry looked on in shock and not a little relief. Ginny's classmates seemed to be acknowledging her existence, and not in a negative way, which was definitely more than Harry had expected. *But then*, mused Harry, *they haven't had to put up with the Weasleys here in school*. It was a stroke of good fortune that the first-years had decided to recognize her as a Slytherin, it meant that, even though it was doubtful they would be very friendly, they were at least not openly hostile. As long as Ginny didn't make a drastic mistake and insult someone like Helen Vandall, she would be okay. Now all he had to do was get the older years to back off for a couple of weeks, and give Ginny a few pointers for surviving in Slytherin house. The

Sorting Hat may have thought that she was Slytherin material, but she had, after all, been brought up as an innocent little Gryffindor. Her emotions were too easily read- her every expression betraying her thoughts, and she was full of skewed beliefs, although this was through no fault of her own. She needed to learn that dark did not necessarily mean evil, and she needed to become less sensitive to insults and scorn directed her way. Slytherin house was the complete opposite to Gryffindor, and the only way she could learn all this and survive was if she had help.

“So, Harry, what do you say?”

“Huh? What?” Harry was broken from his reverie by Blaise’s voice blaring in his ear.

“We were wondering if you agreed with the plan?” elaborated Pansy in her usual high-pitched tone.

“What plan?” asked Harry, feeling rather foolish.

“Really Harry, stop mooning over the Weaselette and pay attention,” drawled Draco leaning back in his chair.

Seeing Harry was irritated by this comment and was about to snap back, Theo interrupted and explained.

“We were discussing Gilderoy Lockhart, the smarmy imbecile. I overheard some Ravenclaws talking, and, according to them, the entirety of Lockhart’s books do not make any sense whatsoever. They are unclear, contradict one another, and mostly focus on Gilderoy Lockhart’s heroic nature, rather than on any helpful information on defence.”

“Well, that sure as hell doesn’t surprise me,” drawled Harry.

“Mmm, but the point is that they give us ample ammunition for annoying the man. If we analyze the books, and then point out all the wrong and missing information, he can’t take away points since we are not being outwardly impolite. By reading the books we can see on what points he is unsure, and then ask strategically planned

questions so as to unbalance him. Hopefully this way we will be able to partially deflate his overlarge ego.”

“Yeah,” continued Louisa eagerly. “And we figured that two of us could outwardly show our disgust, maybe Draco and Vincent could do that, while the rest of us pretend to be incredibly impressed by him. Pansy could act like a brainless fan-girl, which would make Lockhart be filled with his own importance. He probably won’t be able to resist bragging about himself, which will hopefully give us lots of extra information. Also, if he feels threatened by Draco and Vince, he’ll probably turn to the rest of us, thinking we admire him. This will make him more open to attack, as he won’t be so defensive to the rest of us. What do you think?”

“Well,” said Harry to his surrounding classmates, after thinking it over, “The idea has merit, but I think it requires too much effort. I for one do not want to read a single one of those books, and I’m sure Draco will agree with me.” Here Draco nodded fervently, looking horrified at the thought of extra reading. “I think that we should first go to a couple of classes and try to evaluate the situation more closely. If Lockhart is truly as conceited as he seems to be at present, then I vote we go ahead with the plan. But it might be that he’ll just waffle on harmlessly and generally leave us alone, letting us ignore him completely.”

“Well, I think you’re making a mistake regarding Lockhart’s character, Harry,” said Theo. “But I suppose that it could be a waste of time and effort to read through all his worthless texts, so yes, I agree to proceed more slowly.”

The other Slyths nodded and murmured their assent, and the subject was allowed to drop.

Slowly the plates in front of them were emptied of food and the chatter in the great hall took on a distinctly sleepy note. Once everyone was finished with their meal, Dumbledore again stood up, a big smile on his face and his customary twinkle in his eyes.

“Well, now that we have eaten our fill, I believe it is time for all of you to retire to your dormitories, pointedly not listen to your professors, and instead stay up talking for at least half the night. So, run along.”

Immediately prefects started calling first-years towards them, and Harry saw the Weasley prefect bustle around with a look of great self-importance. Slowly the hall emptied, the pupils splitting up and heading to their respective common rooms. As the Slytherins headed down towards the dungeons, a passing 6th year prefect named Andrew Bode called out to Harry and his friends,

"There's a meeting in the common room in half an hour. Unpack, then come straight down. Don't be late."

"Sure," replied Harry, nodding in acknowledgement, not at all surprised yet slightly excited. Every year the Slytherins held a meeting to discuss strategies on how to win the house cup, and occasionally problems that affected the entire house. The first years were always excluded from these debates, however, so this was the first time Harry would take part. Reaching the common room entrance, Gregory Goyle intoned

"It's only illegal if someone finds out," in his usual dull, monotonous voice and a hidden panel in the wall slid open.

Walking through the common room, the boys headed down one passageway, the girls down another. The dormitories were always kept separate, although Harry had heard a rumour that there was a secret passageway between the two areas. When Draco heard this, he had insisted on them searching for it, but so far it remained elusive.

Entering their dorm, Harry went straight to the bed furthest away from the door, and began unpacking his things. Finishing, Harry uncurled Isis from around his arm, and placed her on the bed, where she immediately fell asleep. Muttering about lazy snakes whose only talents were sleeping, Harry followed Draco to the common room where they were soon joined by the rest of Slytherin house. When everyone was settled, Melanie Rookwood, a seventh year prefect, stood up.

"Okay, listen up everyone. The sixth and seventh years have formulated a plan to win the house cup, so first we'll explain it to you and then everyone else can add their bit. Alright, Fion, you're up."

"We have decided to first split everyone up into their year groups," started Fion Morag. "The seventh years will mainly just earn points from teachers for right answers in class, etc. Apart from that we'll just act normally. The sixth years, since they don't have any important exams or anything, can try and discover plans and secrets from other houses that are against the rules. They can then manipulate it so as teachers find out and take away points. Preferably go for McGonagall, as she takes away the most points. It shouldn't be too hard, as they're not that good at discretion."

"Now, fifth years," here Morag began to smirk maliciously, "You have the honour of working on Gilderoy Lockhart. Make him like you. Flatter him as much as possible, stare at him dreamily, say things like 'oh professor you're so brave,' and generally give him all of your attention."

"What!"

"No way!"

"Are you freakin' *crazy!*"

The fifth years were yelling in outrage, while the rest of the house smirked in satisfaction, incredibly glad that they did not have to take part in such humiliation.

"Why us?" shouted Bole, a fifth-year beater on the quidditch team. "We have our OWLs this year. Relegate it to the fourth-years instead." This caused the fourth years immediately lost their smirks and began to look extremely worried. Luckily for them, however, Morag remained adamant.

"Look, the man is completely dim; he'll never notice that you're faking it no matter how insincere you sound. It'll be incredibly easy to prize points out of him, therefore it won't take up much time at all. So you really don't have any cause to complain."

"So what, you want us all to bat our eyelashes and simper at that ego-centric creep?" asked Ingrid Cartwright, a stunningly beautiful girl, who was currently glaring daggers at the seventh year prefect.

"Yep, sounds about right," said Morag happily.

"Well, what about the guys, we can't flirt with him," pointed out another fifth-year.

"Well," mused Morag, "We can't rule out the possibility that he might be gay." Seeing the utterly horrified looks directed his way, he relented. "Okay, fine, anyone of the same sex just has to admire him, and say that Lockhart's their role model, etc. Right! Now that that's settled, fourth years: You have to run errands for the teachers. Offer to work in the Greenhouses for points, that sort of thing. Got that?" There were mumbles of complaint, but Morag carried on regardless. "Third years, I want you to do the whole 'Slytherins are so misunderstood' thing. Be all hurt and innocent when you're insulted by Gryffindors, act all happy when the teachers acknowledge you, and *stay out of trouble*. Oh, and you'll probably have to do that next year as well."

"So you're telling us we can't insult Gryffindors for two whole years!" said Michael Wane in disbelief.

"No, I'm saying you can't insult Gryffindors in front of teachers for two whole years. They're the ones that give points. Oh, and try and target sympathetic teachers like Sprout or Flitwick. And don't try it on Sinistra, I found out this summer that she used to be a Slytherin, so no way will she fall for it. Now, second years." Here Harry sat up started listening more attentively, having been watching the proceedings so far with amusement.

"Okay, you lot, as well as the first years, have to antagonize students from the other house, preferably Gryffindors. Normally it would just be the firsties, but you guys did such a good job last year that you may as well continue. Also, I want you to follow the teachers and work out their schedules and where they're likely to be at different times during the week. This will help us to get other houses into, and for us to stay out of, trouble. And try to work out when they're likely to be in a bad mood, like when they've had a lesson with their worst class, or when they do most of their marking. Is that alright with everyone? No questions?"

After a chorus of 'No' and shaking of heads (along with hateful glares from the fifth years) Melanie Rookwood again stood up.

"Now, prefects, listen up. We two seventh year prefects will be fair when dealing with other houses, but favour this house slightly. In the last couple of weeks of school, however, we'll start being really hard on other houses and take away lots of points. This will hopefully stop the teachers from revoking our badges, as they will only find out when it's too late. And since we're leaving after this year, they won't be able to punish us. Sixth year prefects, I want one of you to be really unfair towards other houses. Then, after the teachers start lecturing you, swap to one of the fifth year prefects. Other fifth year prefect, I want you to scout around the school and warn the rest of us when teachers or prefects are coming. Then Ann Eldar," she gestured to a pretty and rather kind looking sixth year prefect, "You can baby all the first years and look after them. Make sure teachers notice, so that they get the impression that you're helping them, therefore making them think that we Slytherin prefects aren't all unfair and vindictive. So that's the plan, what do you think?"

"I think that it's a bit too clear cut," drawled Adrian Pucey, a chaser on the quidditch team. "I think that we should mix it up a bit. Have one or two people from each year swap with another class."

"Who agrees?" said Fion Morag, glancing around the assembled students. Most of them nodded, and a deafening yell of agreement came from the fifth years. "Okay, we'll go with that, but you guys sort out who'll swap yourselves. Any other ideas?"

"I think more people should suck up to Lockhart. We could get loads of points from it," said a girl who Harry didn't recognize. This suggestion met with mixed approval (most people looked sickened, but others wanted an easy assignment), so Morag merely replied that whoever wanted to could try it, but it wasn't compulsory. After that there were no more suggestions, so Melanie said,

"Okay, the plan's finalized. If anyone thinks up another strategy, let us know. But the rules we've laid down now are not going to change. Now, onto another subject, I suggest all Slytherins keep their heads down this year. I'm certain most of you have heard the rumours, so

I'm sure you'll agree that it would be best if we stay out of trouble. Make sure you don't get caught breaking school rules, and avoid staying out after curfew. None of us sure what's going to happen, but its best not to give any reason for the teachers to target us. Well, that's all, the meeting is now closed."

There was silence for a while as they mulled over what had been said to them. Some people looked totally confused, obviously not having heard anything, while others looked resigned. The silence was broken as people began bargaining with each other to swap duties with a student in another year. Harry, deciding it would be best not to enrage the Gryffindors (he didn't want to alienate Fred and George completely, as he hoped that he would be able to talk them into accepting Ginny's house placement), walked over to Warrington, a sixth year chaser.

"How about we swap? I know how dedicated you are to infuriating Gryffindors and torturing Hufflepuffs," said Harry with a slight smirk. Indeed, Warrington's dangerous and twisted sense of humour was well known, and almost always directed at those two houses.

"Indeed, that is very true," replied Warrington in his low, slightly hoarse, voice. "But no way am I running after the teachers for a whole year. So, sorry, no deal." He turned to leave, but Harry reached out to stop him.

"Okay, how about this. I still follow the teachers and spy on the other houses, and all you do is insult them."

"Huh, you seem desperate," said Warrington, slightly suspicious. "But sure, I agree." Harry held out his hand and they shook on it, the elder Slytherin smirking slightly, pleased that he had practically nothing to do. However, his smile disappeared when he heard what Harry said next.

"I have a favour to ask you."

"Uh, uh, I don't do favours," scowled Warrington, obviously displeased.

"Look, all I want you to do is leave Virginia Weasley alone. Don't target her because of her brothers."

"The first year?"

"Yeah,"

"Hmm, I guess I could do that," said Warrington thoughtfully. "She is a Slytherin after all, and therefore must be slightly more deserving of attention than her infuriating brothers. And hey, I'll even prevent a couple of friends from harassing her."

"Cool, thanks, I'd appreciate that" said Harry sincerely, surprised that the chaser had agreed at all, let alone decided to stop others. "I owe you."

"Don't bother. Consider it part of our deal."

With that the sixth year nodded slightly and strode off to a group of students near the entrance of the common room.

'Well, he's in a good mood,' thought Harry, staring after him in surprise. *'Anyway, next stop, Flint.'* He was not at all looking forward to speaking with the fanatic Quidditch captain, as he would probably rant on about Quidditch tactics for at least half an hour. Looking around, Harry saw him seated in an armchair near the ornate fireplace, scribbling on a scrap of parchment. As he walked towards him, Harry's heart sank as he saw that it was covered with different Quidditch plays.

"Flint, can you please leave Virginia Weasley alone." Harry said it very fast and directly, deciding that the quicker he finished, the less likely it was that he would be cornered and lectured on Quidditch. Flint didn't even look up as he answered, "Leave the baby Weasley alone, yeah, will do," and continued working.

'Well, that was easy,' thought Harry, slightly bemused. Unfortunately, just as he was walking away, Flint yelled after him, "Quidditch practice on Saturday, four a.m, don't protest!" and Harry wandered over to the two beaters looking dejected. Derrick and Bole turned out to be slightly harder to convince, as they had already started planning

on using Ginny to enrage Fred and George, who were Beaters for Gryffindor. Harry had to resort to parting with his most cherished blackmail material on Flint, namely that he slept with a toy bunny rabbit named Twinkles under his pillow. He had discovered this through Isis, and had been hoping to use it to skip a few Quidditch practices. However, Harry was slightly mollified when, in return, the two Beaters agreed to leave the Ginny alone and inform Harry if they heard of anyone plotting against her. Not being able to see Adrian Pucey or Bletchley (who were the other members of the Quidditch team) Harry decided he may as well work on the third years. After talking to Anthony Wrath, who was one of the most influential of that class, and making it perfectly clear that he would protect Ginny and would be most displeased if she was harmed in anyway, Harry happily wandered up to bed, knowing that Anthony would warn the other third years unless he wanted McGonagall to accidentally find out exactly who charmed the transfiguration classroom bright green last year.

A/N Well, there you go. Not my best chapter, but more will happen in the next one. Sorry for the long wait, but I've been

Chapter 6

Ginny's point of view:

"Hmm, an all Gryffindor family, that's certain, and you wish to join them...yet I see potential for something more..."

"Gryffindor, please put me in Gryffindor."

"That house will not serve you well..."

"Look you bloody useless piece of singing headgear! I want to be in Gryffindor!"

"No, I am sorry, but you will see the wisdom of the choice in the end. Remember, in your house you will find your true friends. You belong in SLYTHERIN!"

Suddenly all noise in the hall ceased and was replaced with a repressive silence.

"Merlin, this is really not my day."

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II

"So, what possibly possessed that ridiculous Sorting Hat to send you to the snake pit?"

"Search me," muttered Ginny sulkily in reply to Helen Vandall's question. She was sitting curled up in her bed, while her two new roommates wandered aimlessly around inspecting the room. Ginny had taken one glance and hated it. Everything was covered in green and silver.

"There must be some valid reason. Unless the charms on the damn thing are malfunctioning for some reason or another."

"Hey! Look at this bathroom! Not too shabby," grinned Aunja Baddock, peering into the large room whose walls were charmed to give the impression that you were underwater.

"It's nothing to what *I'm* used to," sniffed Helen, abandoning her questioning of Ginny. "I cannot comprehend why Hogwarts is so widely proclaimed as the best school for magic in Europe, when it does not even provide its students with private rooms."

"They do in the higher years," commented Aunja. "But I agree. Even the teaching is overrated if the new Defence Professor is anything to go by. My parents had a fit when they found out he was teaching."

"Yes, one can hardly imagine that Lockhart is even remotely proficient," sneered Helen. "But back to my question," she continued, turning back to Ginny who was glowering at her green bedspread.

"I honestly have no idea why I'm here. I most definitely don't *want* to be here. The sorting hat said something about 'potential', but personally I think the decaying piece of useless matter just wanted to make my life hell."

"The thought that your house placement was some obscure joke for the hat's twisted amusement did cross my mind," drawled Helen. "However, so far the hat has not made any noticeable mistakes, so I think you'll just have to accept the fact that you're Slytherin material."

"No! I'm not! I hate snakes, my favourite colour is not green or silver and I do not go around planning world domination and insulting everyone 24-7!"

Ginny's two roommates sighed and exchanged glances.

"Listen Virginia," said Aunja in what Ginny considered to be a condescending tone of voice. "I realise that all your life you've been shown a very stylized version of Slytherins. They're evil, they hate Muggles, and they're snobbish and cruel. But surely it's time to put aside such childish ideas? Haven't you ever considered the fact that you've been told all this by Gryffindors and have not experienced it for yourself? Before tonight, how many Slytherins did you know?"

"Erm, Harry Potter and...well, I met Malfoy."

"Do you consider two people out of hundreds to be a good representation of Slytherin?"

“Um...no, I guess not.”

“And has anybody you’ve met since seemed the epitome of everything dark and evil?” pressed Aunja.

“No, not really,” said Ginny begrudgingly.

“There you go then. Why don’t you wait and experience Slytherin house yourself before coming to a decision?” finished Aunja triumphantly as Ginny merely nodded slowly.

“You can definitely tell that you are descended from Ravenclaws,” remarked Helen dryly. Aunja merely shrugged slightly and started unpacking her trunk.

“Rational discussion gets you far,” she said offhandedly, preoccupied with dumping clothes on her bed.

“I’ve always found that guile and blackmail get me further,” drawled Helen, standing up and stretching with, as Ginny noted sourly, extreme elegance.

“But still,” Helen persisted, “why are you in Slytherin? You don’t seem very cunning, and I think we can rule out ruthless, so are you ambitious?”

“No,” said Ginny automatically, but after she answered she realised that wasn’t completely true. All her life she had been petted and praised by her family. Once she got onboard the Hogwarts train, however, she was ignored by everybody, which she disliked immensely. “I want to be rich,” she spoke suddenly. “I hate being poor and looked down upon. I hate not having proper clothes or books because of my Dad’s obsession with Muggles and his low paying job.” As she talked she became more and more confident. She had not truly considered her and her family’s situation and poverty before, but now she realised just how much she deplored her condition and longed for it to change. As she spoke, the words poured out in an uncontrollable stream. “I hate the pitying glances people give me and the sneering comments. I hate being dismissed as ‘just another Weasley’ in hand-me-down robes and freckles. I want to be noticed, I

want people to know my name.” She stopped, slightly bewildered by the rush of unfamiliar feelings.

“Well, Virginia,” drawled Helen wryly. “You’re already partway there. After tonight, I believe the whole school knows who you are.”

At this Ginny’s face fell. “My parents and brothers are going to kill me. Their faces at the sorting...so hurt and shocked. So *angry*.”

“Oh, lighten up, honey,” said Aunja comfortingly, still rummaging through her luggage. “You’re well shot of the self-righteous idiots.”

“Aunja is right,” put in Helen. “They are superfluous. Slytherins stick together, and despite my earlier misgivings, you are a Slytherin. Your lengthy monologue proved that. I comprehend that it is and will be difficult for you to adjust, coming from a family of bigoted Gryffindors, but I am willing to help you. Merlin knows your family is a complete disgrace and I’m not the type to be charitable to muggle-loving fools, but you are a Slytherin and consequently worthy of my attention. Now, I am going to sleep and I suggest both of you do likewise. Goodnight.”

Muttering a goodnight in reply Ginny curled up in bed, surprisingly feeling slightly better after hearing Helen’s rather conceited words. At least her dorm-mates were not ostracising her, and Slytherin house did not seem *quite* as despicable as her brothers attested.

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Harry’s point of view:

“She better be bloody grateful for this,” grumbled Harry as he fought with Crabbe for the dominance over the bathroom sink.

“If I didn’t know that the whole family are entirely incompetent wizards, I would think the Weasley-girl bewitched you,” remarked Draco as he lathered copious amounts of gel in his hair. “You never willingly wake with the rest of us.”

“And I’m definitely regretting it,” scowled Harry, dodging Crabbe’s elbow. After only just avoiding a punch aimed for his face, Harry drew his wand, pointed it at Crabbe and muttered a spell. Unfortunately Crabbe had just ducked, preparing to head-but Harry in the stomach, so the spell reflected off the mirror and hit Theodore Nott instead.

“Potter!” yelled an enraged, leg-locked Theo from the ground.

“Uh, see you at breakfast,” Harry rushed out, hurriedly running from the room amidst laughter. He reached the common room just as Ginny appeared from the girl’s dormitories, rubbing sleep from her eyes and looking nervous. Grabbing hold of her arm, Harry steered her to a more secluded part of the room.

“So, how are you?” asked Harry, letting some concern show on his face.

“Miserable. I...I don’t want to confront my brothers,” said Ginny in a subdued tone of voice.

“Wrong answer,” said Harry sternly.

“Huh?” said Ginny, bewildered.

“Never show weakness, or tell others what you are thinking. Your true feelings should be better guarded than Gringotts,” Harry lectured. “Therefore, when you see your brothers try to keep outward signs of distress at a minimum. On no account will you cry. No Slytherin shows such a misplaced emotion in public.”

“Okay,” mumbled Ginny looking supremely unconfident.

“Next, try to gain allies or you won’t survive. Cultivate friendships, put up with your classmates even if they’re obnoxious little brats. And try to get the teachers to like you, especially Professor Snape. Our Head of House supporting you would cut you some slack. No one reasonably psychologically balanced person goes against Snape.”

“But he’s evil! Everyone says so!” exclaimed Ginny, horrified.

"See, impulsive words like that have got to go," reprimanded Harry.
"And who's everyone?"

"Well, my brothers and parents..."

"The same idiots who maintain that the definition of Slytherin is evil?" said Harry, raising his eyebrow.

"Yes," mumbled Ginny.

"I think that illustrates my point," said Harry, sneering slightly. "Do not insult Snape again or everyone will immediately turn on you. He is highly respected, and slights towards him will not be tolerated. Understood?"

"Yes," repeated Ginny quietly.

"I realise that it will take time to eradicate the Gryffindor beliefs you hold, but until then keep your mouth shut on such subjects," instructed Harry. "Avoid the older Slytherins when possible. Do not get in their way or they'll pulverise you. As for the younger years, you must be careful. Considering your position, it would not be wise to be confrontational, but you must not allow yourself be belittled or manipulated either."

"How do I do that?" asked Ginny looking lost.

"Quick comebacks, sarcastic comments, that sort of thing. Some blackmail material would be useful. Do not project hurt, do not falter. Anger is permissible, so if you cannot contain your emotion, show fury. It's not the most advantageous reaction, but it is preferable to tears and will have to be sufficient until you learn control. Get all that?"

Ginny nodded, her mind in a daze.

"Good. So, how are you feeling?" Harry tipped his head slightly, cocking an eyebrow. He matched his earlier posture.

"Fine," replied Ginny flatly.

“Better,” Harry said brightly. “Now I’m going to go eat.”

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“So, who wants to skive off Charms?”

“No, Blaise,” responded Theo not looking up from his plate. Pouting she turned her hopeful and slightly pleading gaze to Draco.

“No bloody way, are you crazy? My father would cut me up into so many pieces they’d be picking me up for weeks.”

“Well what about you then, Harry? You don’t have parents so you don’t have that excuse.”

Harry yawned slightly before taking a sip of coffee, ignoring her, as usual, rather tactless comments. “Flitwick is not that bad, and I enjoy Charms. I wouldn’t mind skipping History though. Now that is truly tedious.”

“Flitwick’s horrible. The most flattering remark he’s ever deigned to give me is ‘*Interesting*,’” complained Blaise, viciously stabbing a piece of bacon.

“Well, to be fair, your spell results are often quite...remarkable,” said Harry.

“He means bloody outrageous and more than a little life-threatening,” smirked Draco.

“Hey, will you two just let the incident with the pineapple drop? It was just a once-in-a-lifetime event.”

“Oh, like that time when you mispronounced a colour charm and ended up giving Flitwick pigtails?” asked Harry innocently.

“Or when you almost levitated Parvati Patil out the window because you messed up a simple cheering charm?” inquired Draco politely.

“Or when-”

“Okay, you two shut up before I try and charm you!” threatened Blaise, brandishing her wand. The two boys immediately backed down, trying to look contrite. The other Slytherins laughed.

“Oh, I can still remember Patil’s horrified screams as she went zooming around the room,” sighed Louisa dreamily.

“It is one of my happiest memories,” concurred Millicent, wiping away a fake tear.

“Yeah, that was fun,” grinned Blaise, immediately lightening up.

“Well, we have Transfiguration first anyway, with the Ravenclaws, so it’s a futile discussion,” drawled Harry.

“I hate have having lessons with them. They’re so bloody self-satisfied and fastidious,” glared Draco, standing up and grabbing his bag.

“You’re just jealous ‘cause they’re smarter than you,” smirked Millicent as she strode off with Pansy.

“I’m not *jealous*. Malfoys are never *jealous*,” scowled Draco at her retreating back.

“So does that mean you’re envious instead?” asked Harry as he took a last sip of coffee and began to make his way towards the door. He grinned at Draco’s inelegant huff of indignation and walked out of the hall with Blaise laughing beside him.

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“...animate to inanimate objects. The power must be distributed equally, with a lot of control, therefore the wand movement contains a light upwards flick...”

Harry was no longer laughing. Sitting slumped against his desk, with a glazed expression on his face, he listened to McGonagall drone on about the theory of transfiguring beetles into buttons, something that Harry deemed to be utterly useless. If he wanted a button he’d bloody

well buy one instead of running around trying to find an unsuspecting insect.

“...The slight twist of the wrist is important in bringing the two previously mentioned wand movements together, therefore creating one smooth movement making the magic uninterrupted...”

Sighing, Harry looked around at the rest of the class. The Ravenclaws were either staring avidly at the Professor, or scribbling down complicated notes that Harry was sure he'd find incomprehensible. Draco, who was sitting on Harry's right, was busy levitating a piece of parchment over to Pansy's table, with Theo looking on indifferently. Blaise was just glaring at her beetle, which kept on trying to run away, and fingering her wand impatiently. Harry and Blaise shared the opinion that learning theory was a waste of time. They both deemed it much quicker, easier and generally more efficient to just wave their wands, concentrate on what they wanted to happen, and hope for the best. Theory was just an unneeded complication.

Unfortunately, it was painfully obvious that McGonagall did not agree with this view point. When the bell signalling the start of their lunch break rang, they had still not started on the practical work. On the contrary, the Professor set them a three page essay to write on the theory behind the transfiguration, something that Harry was determined to copy from Pansy as she seemed to have paid some vague attention to the lecture. As soon as the lesson ended Harry and Blaise rushed from the room as fast as possible, followed by most of their house-mates, and were half-way to the Great Hall before the Ravenclaws had finished packing up.

They were almost at the Great Hall when Harry was detained by Daisy Thornbell.

“Do you mind having that little chat we mentioned now?”

Harry *did* mind, as he was starving, but faced with the choice of infuriating Daisy or going hungry, Harry sure as hell knew which one he'd pick.

“Fine by me,” he answered.

The sixth year nodded, then abruptly turned and walked away from him, leaving him to follow. Sighing, Harry waved goodbye to his friends, then walked after her. Daisy only stopped when they got to the dungeons. Turning down a side corridor that Harry had never seen before, she stopped in front of a seemingly blank wall. Muttering something under her breath, she waved her wand in a complicated motion, and an opening in the wall appeared. Once they had both entered the now revealed room (with, in Harry's case, no small amount of cautiousness) Daisy finally turned to face him again.

"So, your proposition," prompted Harry, managing to keep his countenance calm and collected.

"As you know," she said in her cold, low voice, "there are rumours spreading about an impending...event in the school. I have not been able to fully ascertain who is behind it but I am leaning towards The Dark Lord."

"What!" Harry stared at her in shock, his composure forgotten. Voldemort, again? That, he had not expected. Daisy continued on, disregarding the interruption.

"Last year as well, the so-called deceased Dark Lord managed to infiltrate the school's apparently powerful defences. It is painfully obvious to me that the Dark Lord is most definitely not dead, and is looking for any opportunity to return to his former position of power. I do not wish for the Dark Lord's resurrection. My parents are Hufflepuffs, as you know, and would no doubt be targeted. Also, all the plans I have laid down would go awry if a war broke out. Not to mention that I abhor the idea of bowing down to anybody, let alone a megalomaniac, mass-murderer."

"What's that got to do with me?" said Harry warily, not too happy about being miles underneath the school in a dungeon with one of the most feared Slytherin students.

"Everything," said Daisy a trifle impatiently. "You destroyed him when you were one-years old. You also foiled his plan last year. The wizard that everyone hails as the most powerful wizard in the world, namely Dumbledore, was not involved in any of these feats. Therefore, I have

drawn the conclusion that you are the one with the highest chance of defeating the Dark Lord when he returns.”

“What!” yelled Harry. “How the hell did you decide that? I’m only twelve! And what do mean by ‘when’ he returns?”

“Well, if nothing else, you are the one most likely to come into contact with him, as the Dark Lord will definitely want to procure his revenge on you. If you manage to at least hold your own, it will weaken his standing and piss off, something that is to be desired. And the Dark Lord will return at some point. In his present form I doubt he can be killed, and he will never stop attempting to return to his former glory. It is only a matter of time.”

“Oh.” Harry was nonplussed.

“Anyway, so as to further your chances of at least not dying, I have decided to train you. Basic duelling only to start with, but we can gradually build up from that. And-”

“Hang on,” interrupted Harry, staring at her in bemusement. “*You*, want to help *me*?”

“Broadly speaking yes. My main goal is to help myself.”

“Yes, yes,” said Harry, waving away her words. “That is understandable, but the point is you are willing to teach me duelling! I can’t believe it; I think I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

“So, do you agree?”

“Hell yes!”

Chapter 7

“Harry Potter, favoured student of the influential Slytherin Daisy Thornbell! No! Even better; Harry Potter, protégé of the most powerful dueller in Slytherin! Man, that sounds good.”

Practically oozing smug satisfaction, Harry swaggered down the deserted corridors on his way to the Great Hall. He had quickly recovered from his shock at the sixth-year's offer, and was now busy gloating over all the advantages it would bring him. Any of the older students taking an interest in the younger years was unusual; the widely proclaimed best dueller in Slytherin (and by default the whole of Hogwarts) giving lessons to a second year was completely unheard of. Harry knew that he would rise in standing and definitely gain more influence in Slytherin after this. Duelling skills were important for rising in the ambitious house. At least once every week a duel took place in the common to settle disputes. If Harry improved enough he could afford to go against the older Slytherins and would certainly be able to control the younger years. What was more, he'd be able to kick Weasley's ass. *'Ah, life is good,'* sighed Harry to himself in content.

His happy musings were rudely interrupted, however, as he neared the Great Hall. Loud shrieks were echoing down the corridor causing Harry to wince at the high-pitched voice ringing in his ears.

“Your father and I are so ashamed...how can we face our friends after this? ...Slytherin! I raised you better than that!”

Entering the hall Harry's suspicions were proved correct. Students anywhere near the Slytherin table were covering their ears protectively while Ginny Weasley stared in shock and horror at the red and smoking envelope in front of her. She had received a Howler from her obviously infuriated mother and Harry idly wondered which of her brothers had informed the plump, red-headed woman. Probably all of them sent outraged letters as soon as they could, decided Harry, seeing the nasty glares the Weasley brothers were directing at their sister.

Protests against the horrible noise were heard from all over the hall.

“Get that thing out of here!” shouted a Ravenclaw.

“Merlin! Someone make that woman to *shut up!*” yelled a fifth year Slytherin.

“Cast a silencing spell before my eardrums explode!” Flint bellowed over the din.

Finally, though, the screams came to an end as the envelope combusted leaving only a small pile of ashes.

‘This is not good,’ thought Harry as he saw Ginny’s eyes tear up. She was obviously struggling not to break down completely. Her brothers were still glaring at her from the Gryffindor table, as were many Slytherins who were obviously not happy at being yelled at and having their meal disrupted with insults against their house. Deciding that he’d better do something, and fast, Harry hurried forward to where Ginny and the rest of the first years were sitting. She did not look up when Harry called her name and did not respond to his urging her to leave the hall, merely staring fixedly at the cinders of the Howler.

“You two,” Harry said peremptorily, indicating Helen Vandall and Aunja Baddock. “Get her out of here before this already volatile situation completely erupts.”

Harry glared when he saw Helen Vandall draw herself up haughtily, obviously about to protest against being ordered about.

“You’re her dorm-mates,” snapped Harry. “You should look out for one another. Now help her!”

“Of course,” said Aunja slightly shakily, obviously still taken aback by Mrs Weasley’s howler. Helen Vandall also seemed to submit to Harry’s words and pulled Ginny out of her seat. The two girls managed to get the shell-shocked red-head out of the hall without Ginny bursting into tears, her brothers insulting her or being hit by and stray hexes from the Slytherin table, and Harry decided they had everything under control and sat down beside Draco who was busy whining, as usual.

“Is that woman a banshee? Really, she could at least have been considerate enough not to send the Howler during lunch. There was no need to subject the rest of us to such torture,” complained Draco, who was acting as if the whole thing was staged just so as to inconvenience him.

Sighing, Harry helped himself to some mashed potatoes, preparing for a long lunch break with Draco whining ceaselessly. He was pleased to notice, though, that the Slytherins were directing their irritation at Mrs Weasley and her fog-horn voice rather than Ginny.

“So, Harry,” said Blaise, pointedly turning away from Draco. “Where did you disappear off to?” Draco paused slightly in giving his rather loud monologue, and directed his penetrating grey eyes at Harry.

“I’d also like to know what Thornbell wanted,” he drawled.

“None of your business,” said Harry cheerfully, stealing some chicken from Theodore’s plate. The boy merely scowled darkly at him and continued eating, disapproving of what he called ‘immature behaviour not befitting a Slytherin.’

Draco shrugged elegantly and turned back to Pansy and Louisa, the only two who remained attentive even in the middle of one of his rants. Blaise, however, was not deterred.

“Come on!” she whined. “I want to know!”

“No”

“*Please?*”

“Why do you care?”

“I’m bored.”

“Then go and annoy some Hufflepuffs or something.”

Ten minutes later, on their way to their common room, Blaise was still at it.

“Just tell me!”

“LEAVE ME ALONE!” yelled a harassed and irate Harry, desperately trying to think of a way to get rid of her. He didn’t want the fact that he was getting lessons from a sixth year to become general knowledge before he’d learnt how to fight. Some Slytherins would no doubt attempt to hex him so as to judge his skills and see whether he was a threat or not. If he couldn’t protect himself, he’d be in for a rough couple of months. Hell, he’d practically have to live in the hospital-wing.

“How about an exchange of information,” conceded Blaise, giving up on her normal tell-me-or-I’ll-follow-you-around-and-be-annoying strategy.

“What info?” asked Harry cautiously.

“A pet project of mine, which I’m sure you’ll be interested in.”

“Well, one can’t help but admire your persistence, so okay, deal.” They shook hands, before Harry continued. “The reason I wandered off was because I had a chat with Daisy Thornbell.”

“Yes, I know that, but what about,” prompted Blaise impatiently.

“Oh you know, this and that,” said Harry faking casualness. “She offered to tutor me in duelling.”

“She WHAT!” yelled Blaise.

“Offered to teach me duelling,” repeated Harry with a slight smirk. “It came as a quite a surprise, but of course I accepted.”

“You lucky, lucky bastard,” growled Blaise enviously. “Vampire’s fangs, what wouldn’t I give to have even *one* lesson with her and you get it for *free*! It’s so bloody unfair!”

“Talent reaps its own rewards,” commented Harry smoothly. “Now how about your end of the deal?”

"You know on the train I disappeared for quite a while?" said Blaise in a slightly petulant voice, still glaring at Harry.

"Yeah, you said something about 'mingling'."

"Exactly. I have decided to pick a few people from every house, scattered over the different year sections, and study them for the next week or so. Find out who their friends are, their approximate time tables etcetera."

"What for," asked Harry nonplussed. "It seems kind of pointless to me."

"To you, yes. But to me, a metamorphmagus, no," said Blaise smugly, discarding her jealousy of Harry in favour of pointing out her superiority. "Last year you said I should find out more about people before I transform into them. Well, for once you had a vaguely good idea and I decided to follow your advice. By the end of the week, two at the most, I should have a dozen students who I can transform into without awakening suspicion. I'll be able to sneak around everywhere and, so long as I transform into a Prefect, any time as well. I'll be able to discover loads of info which I can either use myself or sell on to someone else, and I'll be able to have some fun by messing with people's minds along the way," Blaise ended triumphantly. Harry shuddered slightly at the thought of Blaise wreaking uncontained havoc all over the castle, but that thought quickly gave way to another.

"Blaise," he said, affectionately draping an arm round her shoulders. "We're friends, you and I, right?"

"Yes, I'll give you some free info now and then," said Blaise rolling her eyes. "Now get off me!"

"Anything for you, my dear Blaise!" said Harry with a grin.

"Whatever, now why don't you go and check up on the Weaselette."

"Good idea," said Harry, sobering up slightly. "Merlin, what is up with that family? Some crazy old hat says one wrong word and now they're all behaving as if she became a psycho serial killer or something. Talk about overreacting!"

"Yeah well, Gryffindor and Slytherin families tend to go to all extremes," remarked Blaise. "If you need any help with Weaselette, just tell me, okay?"

"Will do," grinned Harry as he wandered down the corridor heading to the dungeons.

|||||

After finally reaching the common room and asking a passing girl to tell Ginny to come down, Harry settled into one of the sofas to wait and plan what he should do to diffuse the 'Weasley situation' as he now thought of it. He had first decided to talk to the twins as soon as possible, but seeing their reactions to the Howler in the Great Hall, Harry changed his mind. They were obviously still very angry with their little sister, so the best thing would be to let them cool off for a while. No way did Harry want to be on the receiving end of one of their prank ambushes.

Just then, Ginny stepped out into the common room. She was red-eyed and seemed to be on the brink of bursting into tears again, but at least she seemed to be making an effort to stay in control.

"Hey Gin," Harry said softly, feeling sincerely sympathetic for the girl.

"Hi," she choked out in return.

"So how are your classes going?" Harry asked with fake cheerfulness.

"Okay, I had Charms and Herbology; they were both alright," Ginny shrugged, still looking utterly miserable.

Not knowing how to deal with tear-strained girls and deciding that comforting would best be left to her two dorm-mates, Harry went straight to the point.

"I was thinking of talking to your brothers, to try and calm them down. Which of them is the most...approachable?"

"Well, the twins might listen – they like you," sniffed Ginny.

"Hmm, that's what I figured. And Ronald is definitely out, so what about Percy?"

"Uh, I don't know...He's always disliked Slytherins, but he is slightly more level-headed."

Harry nodded thoughtfully, but his expression quickly turned to one of dismay when Ginny burst into tears.

"Why did everything go so wrong?" she wailed, covering her face with her hands. "I just wanted some recognition, some power and suddenly I'm in Slytherin and all my family despises me."

"So that's why you're in this house!" exclaimed Harry, satisfied at solving the small mystery which had been bothering him.

"I hate being poor, being poor sucks," mumbled Ginny, rubbing furiously at her eyes.

"You're right about that," said Harry, thinking back to Dudley's hand-me-down clothes which he had long since burned.

"They looked at me with such anger, hate and distrust, but I didn't do anything!" continued Ginny, oblivious to the interruption. She added, "Not consciously anyway. It's not my fault, how can they blame it all on me?"

"Aww is the little weasel upset?" came an annoying drawl from behind Harry. "Betraying your family and getting disowned must be pretty pissing off."

Turning around, Harry was not surprised to see his blond friend.

"Shut up, Draco," said Harry with a glare, while Ginny's sobs increased. Draco ignored him and focused his attention on the red-head.

"I really don't know why you're acting so distraught. You're lucky to be rid of the taint of your Mudblood-loving family," he continued, reclining elegantly in a nearby chair.

"You can't use that word, it's really insulting!" gasped Ginny, obviously ignoring everything else Draco had said.

Smirking at the look on Draco's face at being lectured on proper vocabulary by a tear-strained Weasley, Harry turned to Ginny.

"Well, you'll just have to get used to it," he said to the rather naïve girl. "Slytherin is full of obnoxious pure-bloods."

"It's not very nice..." said Ginny uncertainly. Even Harry laughed at this.

"Nice! Slyths don't do *nice*," drawled Draco with a derogatory sneer. "We do pragmatic. We do sarcastic. We do better than everyone else."

Ginny still looked uncertain. Draco just stood up and with a parting smirk, swept over to Marcus Flint.

"I don't like him," Ginny shuddered. "My dad says all the Malfoy's are evil."

"Yes, well your dad isn't always right," said Harry dryly. "Draco is dark, yes, but not evil. It's a difference that seems to be much too subtle for Gryffindors to get through their heads. Anyway, you needn't worry; if he bugs you too much just let me know."

"He'd listen to you?" Ginny asked uncertainly.

"Yes, I'd just have to threaten him a bit. The only language he understands is force, although he's also quite fluent in bribery, blackmail and corruption. Anyway, I'll talk to your brothers later on this week; I suggest you go and wash your face before going to your next class. Remember, Slytherins must always appear cool and collected. Composure is everything."

Nodding, Ginny crept back down to the girls dormitories, leaving Harry to sigh over her lack of confidence.

Walking to Charms class, Draco muttered, "She'll survive for a week maximum," and Harry had to admit that he might possibly be right.

Chapter 8:

The next day the second year Slytherins had their first Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson. It far exceeded Harry's expectations.

Entering, he had to resist the urge to gag, as he was faced with hundreds of Gilderoy Lockharts. Smiling with blindingly white teeth from the walls, winking from the many book covers filling the room and, once the students had finished fighting over the back seats and had settled down, the real thing came striding dramatically to the front of the class, his blond hair gleaming and contrasting perfectly with his bright blue robes.

"Welcome to Defence Against the Dark Arts!" he beamed. "I am Professor Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin third class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defence League and five times winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award, but I don't talk about that. I didn't get rid of the Bandon Banshee by *smiling* at her!"

He flashed them a cheesy grin, obviously expecting applause, but was instead rewarded with blank stares. However, he continued his speech.

"In this classroom you will face your worst fears, as it is my job to teach you youngsters how to defend yourselves against the evil creatures that prey off our society. None of you will ever show such daring and expertise as I do, of course, but do not despair! I will always be there, dedicated to making our world a safer and better place."

He struck a heroic pose, making sure to show his profile at the best angle. The thunderstruck silence was broken by Millicent snorting loudly from ill-suppressed laughter.

"I think I just lost a couple of brain cells during that speech," muttered Harry as they all stared at their teacher in morbid fascination.

Lockhart continued blithely on.

"I have here a small test, nothing to worry about. I only want to see how much of my books you understood."

“Wonderful combination; he’s an insane megalomaniac, *and* he gives tests on the first day of school,” whispered Pansy with a sneer. Everyone else just groaned.

“Right then,” said Lockhart, clapping his hands together and smiling round at them. “You have thirty minutes to complete the test. Start now!”

Grumbling, Harry looked down at his question sheet, then stared in disbelief.

He nudged Draco.

“Listen to this, ‘What is Gilderoy Lockhart’s favourite colour?’ Oh, and ‘How many of Gilderoy Lockhart’s books have been sold in Great Britain alone?’ How much more self-obsessed can you get?”

“The man’s completely psycho,” declared Blaise from her seat next to Harry. “Read Question 3, ‘What is Gilderoy Lockhart’s secret ambition?’ If it’s a bloody *secret*, how the hell are we supposed to know about it?”

Harry didn’t answer, as he was busy reading over Draco’s shoulder as the blond read the question ‘What, in your opinion, is Gilderoy Lockhart’s greatest ambition to date?’ and then happily wrote ‘Walking and talking at the same time.’

Utterly incredulous, the Slytherins glanced at each other, muttering in derisive voices, while Millicent was by this time hysterical with laughter.

“Sir?” drawled Louisa, raising a carefully manicured hand. “How exactly is your favourite hair care potion relevant in a Defence class?”

Lockhart’s self-important expression faded slightly before he plastered on a sickening grin which he mistakenly thought was dashing.

“Now, now, just answer the questions.”

“But-” started Theo.

"Look you two, please talk to Ginny," said Harry, coming straight to the point. "She's miserable without her family and needs support."

"She's a Slytherin now, she doesn't need us," scowled George.

"Is that what this is about?" asked Harry incredulously. "You're pissed off with her cause she's not under your control anymore? Or is it that getting placed in Slytherin automatically turned her evil."

"No, of course not," sighed Fred. "But...well, she *is* a Slytherin. She went against centuries of family tradition and-

"For Merlin's sake, since when did tradition mean anything to you?" interrupted Harry in exasperation.

"I don't know her anymore, that's the problem," said Fred slowly. "Slytherins are the complete opposite of us. If we're happy or sad or angry everyone knows it but you lot... you wear masks that we Gryffindors could never penetrate."

"Don't be idiotic," snapped Harry. "One word from a deranged hat doesn't change a person. Ginny's the same as she always was, just less happy because her brothers are being obnoxious gits."

"No, it doesn't change someone, but it has shown that we, her family, never really knew her."

"Really, how did you come to that conclusion," sneered Harry.

"All her life she's been...well *Gryffindor*. She hasn't been cunning and manipulative, she had no ambition. But now she's in Slytherin House, and it shows that she's been hiding her true personality all her life."

"You're insane," stated Harry firmly. "Ginny's so artless and naïve that she would be ripped to shreds if I didn't protect her. She's never hidden her character from you."

The twins made to interrupt, but Harry determinedly kept talking.

"You say she was not manipulative, but then how did she always manage to prank someone but avoid punishment? You always

complained that everyone blamed you for some disturbance when she was the main perpetrator. As for ambition, she's determined to be rich, but is that a crime? Coming from a family like yours it's completely understandable. Ginny got into my house because of traits that were always there for you to see."

The twins were silent, but shifted slightly in discomfort.

"Talk to her," repeated Harry.

"Ok, we will," sighed Fred eventually, George nodding in agreement. "You're right, I know that," continued Fred. "It was just a shock, you know? None of us had ever even contemplated the possibility that our baby sister was a Slytherin."

"And will you try and convince your brothers?" asked Harry hopefully. He was reluctant to approach Percy, who was a prefect and therefore could take off points, or Ron, who was the most hot-headed of the family. However, the twins shook their heads.

"Their reasons are different from ours."

"Yeah, Ron's being a right prat, babbling about evil, slimy Slytherins and betrayal of the family," said George in disgust.

"He's taken it very seriously," agreed Fred. "As if it was a personal slight."

"And Percy?"

"Oh, perfect prefect Percy seems to think it's a slur on his immaculate record. The few words he's said on the subject were all related to how it will effect his future job applications."

"Bastards," sneered Harry.

"I agree with you one hundred percent," shrugged George. "But Gred and I have long ago given up bashing sense into them as a hopeless case."

“Bill and Charlie don’t really give a damn though,” said Fred cheerfully. “They’ve been out of school so long that house rivalries don’t matter, and they’ve always been more laid back. And I’d say Mum’s howler was just a ‘heat-of-the-moment’ thing. She was raging when she first heard, don’t really know why, but she’s almost definitely cooled down by now and will be sending a tearful apology any second.”

“And Dad’ll do what Mum tells him,” finished George with a grin.

“Great, Ginny will be ok, then,” said Harry in relief. “Glad you’re not as insufferable as I thought,” he added with a smirk.

“Hey!” protested George, but he laughed.

“By the way, Harry-old-pal-old-thing,” grinned Fred. “Why are you so concerned over our darling little sister? There’s nothing inappropriate going on, is there?”

“Cause we may have to punch you if there is,” said George solemnly, joining in.

“I’m helping because she won me ten galleons on her house placement,” drawled Harry with a smirk. “Well, it was great having this chat, but I’ve got to go. Nefarious plans to be carried out, I’m sure you’ll understand.”

He slipped down a side passage, leaving the twins gaping after him in shock.

Laughing to himself, he headed down to the dungeons, nodding greetings to passing Slytherins. He passed the common room entrance without pausing; moving deeper under the school navigating the maze-like corridors without faltering. After many twisting staircases and lethal traps, (the dungeons were littered with dangerous curses to prevent potential prisoners from escaping) he came to a patch of wall marked with a small engraving of a snake.

-Open- he hissed, his eyes glowing slightly in the light coming from the candelabra. The stone shimmered out of sight, revealing an archway which Harry briskly walked through. He strode down the narrow passageway until he reached a spacious and luxurious room.

Green hangings hung from the walls, bookcases lined the room, and everlasting fire burned in the ornate fireplace.

Harry had found this hidden place, along with several others, in his first year. He guessed that they had been built by Salazar Slytherin as they were all only accessible to parselmouths. Other students, probably heirs of Slytherin, must also have found the secret rooms, however, as they seemed to have been added to over the years. The swimming pool in the west wing of the dungeons was much too modern, and some of the books in the library were too recent. But Harry knew that he was the only person able to enter at this point in time, seeing as Voldemort, the only other parselmouth in this century, was...indisposed at the present moment. Well, he was the only *human* able to enter, as Nemesis passed through without a problem. Harry grinned slightly as he saw his snake lying curled up in one of the armchairs.

-Isis- he hissed, prodding her softly.

-Go 'way- she hissed sleepily in return, curling up tighter.

-Wake up, or else I'll cast a freezing charm on you- he retorted smoothly, knowing how much the snake detested the cold.

-Fine, fine, but you're evil- she hissed grumpily. **-Now what do you want?-**

-Did you hear anything useful from the other Slytherins?- asked Harry. He had sent her to spy on the seventh years, wanting to know what the hell was going on. The tense atmosphere and rumours were making him slightly uneasy.

-No- Isis hissed, slithering to Harry and settling herself round his neck. **-There were a lot of conflicting ideasss, and they all ssseemed to be lying -**

That was one of the many problems in Slytherin. Slytherins always avoided the truth as much as possible, therefore often making spying fruitless.

-But the whole thing definitely centresss around Malfoy and, according to Melanie Rookwood, involless the Dark One as well-hissed Isis lazily.

-Voldemort? Again?- Harry was horrified, but slightly sceptical. **– How could she know that?-**

-I don't know. However, I got the impression she just let the info slip so as to watch their reactions-

That, thought Harry, was highly probable, as the seventh year prefect enjoyed creating havoc and watching the results.

-Well, keep an ear out for more information, would you?- said Harry, deciding to abandon the allusion to a connection to Voldemort for now.

-Yeah, yeah- hissed Isis irritably. **–Now take me to the Great Hall; if I can't sleep I'll eat instead.-**

-You- noted Harry, getting to his feet, **-must be the laziest and greediest snake around-**

-Maybe, but chocolate pudding is just so *delicious*-

-And you eat way too much of it, you're so damn heavy- scowled Harry, feeling her weight around his neck. **–And *I'm* the one that has to carry you around.-**

-That's what humans are for- hissed Isis complacently. **–And anyway, if I'm spending my time spying for you, the least you could do is be my personal transportation-**

-Huh, that's not a very fair trade in *my* mind-

-That's because you are an idiot.-

Next time he got a pet, Harry decided, he'd get one that couldn't talk.

Chapter 9:

"Coffee, I need coffee," mumbled Harry, slipping into a spare seat between Blaise and Louisa. Blaise, knowing how pissed off he was in the mornings without a dose of caffeine, hurriedly passed him a cup. Gulping down a couple of mouthfuls, and burning his mouth in the process, Harry groaned in annoyance.

"Whatever sadistic bastard invented alarm clocks deserves to be maimed and then violently murdered," he complained, glaring at the world in general.

"You're still late," remarked Theo, who was about to leave the Great Hall for the dungeons.

"Shut up," snapped Harry, but nonetheless, once the other boy had left, grabbed his bag in one hand and stood up, clutching his coffee in the other.

Blaise grabbed some toast before the two started making their way to Potions.

"So spill, what's wrong now," said Blaise in a bored tone.

"Well, my morning started out ok."

"That's good."

"Yeah, but then I woke up."

"Uh huh," responded Blaise distractedly, busy glaring menacingly at a bunch of Hufflepuff first-years. "Must have been so traumatic for you."

"Well it was, 'cos I woke up with this on my covers," snarled Harry, waving a piece of parchment in her face.

"“Potter,” Blaise read. “Tonight, 7 pm.”"

"See?"

"No, I don't, what's going on."

"That," said Harry, pointing at the note accusingly, "is from Daisy Thornbell."

"Right," said Blaise blankly. "But I thought you agreed to her suggestion, and therefore *wanted* this."

"Well, yes, I do, but that's not the point," snapped Harry as they turned down a narrow passageway. "The point is that she managed to get that onto my bed during the middle of the night, *without me noticing!*"

"Wow, that must have needed really advanced spell work, the wards around the dormitories are very difficult to breach," said Blaise contemplatively, absent-mindedly dodging a patch of floor which opened to reveal a mass of evil looking liquid which, rumour had it, had claimed the lives of sixteen first years and one particularly stupid sixth year Hufflepuff in the past couple of centuries.

"Blaise imagine the potential danger! She could do anything, hex me bright yellow or transfigure me into a beetle and I wouldn't even notice until I woke up!"

"Shit, I hadn't thought of that. Salazar's wand, this is bad," Blaise swore, finally catching on, her mind running through ways to block the sixth year from sneaking up on *her*, but mostly coming up blank.

"And she could do that to anyone! She can get anywhere, anytime, and she's lethal!" Harry was by now hyperventilating. "Did you hear what she did to that fifth year that aimed badly and accidentally drenched her robes in itching powder? I heard he disappeared for over two weeks! No one could find him!"

"Yeah, and the third year who ended up in the hospital wing for three days!"

"Oh Merlin, I'd forgotten that one," wailed Harry.

"Well, think of it this way, she obviously doesn't dislike you if she's offering duelling lessons, so she probably won't target you," comforted Blaise, attempting to calm her friend down.

“True,” nodded Harry, slightly appeased. “But I’m still going to search through the library for some good warding spells.”

"Me too," said Blaise fervently.

Just then the bell signalling the start of lessons rang.

“Oops,” said Blaise unconcernedly, and the two continued to stroll down the corridor until they reached the potions classroom. Knocking on the door, they entered and Harry put on an apologetic smile and said,

“Sorry Professor. We lost track of time.”

“Perfectly understandable,” drawled Snape, waving the two to their seats. “Sit down and prepare your ingredients. Today you will be making a simple hair-renewal potion.”

Smirking at the glowering Gryffindors, Harry and Blaise made their way to two benches at the back of the room and settled down, preparing for an amusing lesson.

“Weasley! You imbecile! I said a *blue* flame. Ten points from Gryffindor!”

Ah yes, Potions was always fun.

NN

At lunch time, sitting in the Great Hall and eating apple pie as a main course, Harry was in a good mood. He'd had, as predicted, a very satisfying Potions lesson watching his least favourite person in the whole school (Ronald Weasley) being ridiculed in front of the whole class. He'd then made his way to Transfiguration which had been slightly frustrating, as he'd finally changed his beetle into a button, only to realise he'd been doing the wrong assignment (they'd apparently swapped to turning it into a marble statue) and had been lectured by McGonagall in front of a very smug Blaise. However, things got better on the way to lunch, when he saw an exceedingly cheerful Ginny laughing with Fred and George, meaning that Harry could probably stop constantly baby-sitting her. And then, of course,

Harry was now eating, which invariably made him happy. His sigh of contentment was interrupted, however, by the sight of Draco swaggering over towards him with a self-satisfied smirk on his face, making Harry frown, suspicious of what exactly had put him in such good mood.

“Ah hello, my faithful minions,” the blond said airily, as he came to a halt by Harry and Blaise.

“Can’t you leave your utterly mistaken sense of self-importance unuttered during meals,” sighed Blaise.

“Watch it, Draco, or I may just hex your hair to be an eternal mess,” grinned Harry, who’d always found Draco’s obsession with his hair extremely amusing. “Or worse, make you go bald.”

“Well, you could try,” drawled Draco, “but I think Flint would definitely object to anybody attacking me.”

“What’s Flint got to do with anything?” asked Blaise in confusion, shovelling eggs on her plate.

“Yeah, what...oh shit.” Harry stared at Draco in shock. “You got on the team, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did,” smirked the mini-Malfoy, “as Chaser. Flint is incredibly impressed by my abilities.”

Blaise snorted in disbelief.

“Draco, there haven’t even been any try-outs yet,” she pointed out.

“And Flint would need a *really* good reason to boot Warrington or Pucey off the team. They’re talented and experienced players, not to mention the fact they’d make life hell for Flint if he fired them.”

“Well, my expertise must have convinced him to take the risk,” drawled Draco, still looking smug.

“Don’t give me that bullshit,” frowned Harry. “What’s the real reason he let you on? Extensive blackmail or bribery?”

“Oh, you’ll find out with the rest of the team,” smirked Draco, enjoying irritating his friend.

“Fine,” snapped Harry slightly sulkily. “Don’t tell me.” Then a look of sadistic glee spread over his features. “Oh, I can’t wait until Pucey or Warrington find out. They’re going to *pulverise* you.”

“Uh, yes, well I’m still thinking up a plan to prevent that,” admitted Draco, suddenly looking less confident. Then he brightened slightly. “Well, I’m off to gloat a bit more, see you in Charms.” He swaggered off to where Pansy was sitting; leaving Harry and Blaise convinced they were friends with a dead-man.

NN

Late that evening, in the depth of the castle's dungeons, in a place where other students rarely ventured, a duel was taking place.

Correction, a one sided massacre was taking place.

“Expelliarmus!”

Daisy languidly stepped out of the spell's path, flicking her wand and dispassionately sending three spells in succession.

“Incendio.”

“Furnunculus.”

“Intorqueo.”

Harry managed to dodge the fire spell, was hit full in the face by her second hex but, face screwed up in slight pain, managed to create a shield to defend himself against the Twisting Curse. Adrenalin was pumping through his veins as he dodged curse after curse, only occasionally managing to retaliate.

“Stupefy!” Harry yelled, aiming at where he thought Daisy was, only to find her seconds later two metres to the right.

“Spiculum,” intoned the sixth year in rather bored voice, moving her wand with the utmost precision.

After only the first few minutes of the duel, Harry realised three very important facts. One, Daisy Thornbell was one scary person. Second, she was completely psycho. Third she was trying to fucking *kill* him.

“Inasnum.”

“Trunco.”

Harry desperately dived to the right in a, luckily successful, attempt to avoid the two hexes. *I can't believe it; she sent a mutilation curse at me! I'm going to die!* Harry wailed to himself

His sensible, Slytherin inner voice was telling him to run as fast as he could in the opposite direction. However, his other rather reckless and stubborn inner voice insisted that he couldn't back down from a challenge. Just as Harry was finally going to listen to his survival instincts and get the hell out of there, he was hit by a leg-locker curse and a bone-breaking hex in quick succession. *Oh shit*, Harry groaned to himself, clutching his broken left hand, extremely nervous at the homicidal look in Thornbell's eyes.

Wordlessly, she summoned his wand towards herself.

No! thought Harry frantically, *I can't let her get my wand!* He reached out with his unbroken hand and screwed up his face in concentration, wandlessly calling it back to himself. Daisy Thornbell's eyes widened in shock, then glee, as she saw the wand return to its owner.

Grinning manically, she hit him with another two curses, both of which he was unable to protect himself against, then summoned his wand once more, this time successfully, as Harry was too distracted to be able to use wandless magic. Holding onto the holly wand firmly, she smirked at the defeated heap that was The Boy Who Lived.

“Well, you made many mistakes in this duel,” she drawled, leaning indolently against the wall of the dungeon. “Your dodging skills are adequate, but your spell casting needs extreme improvement. It must come completely naturally, as a duel-to-the-death leaves no time for

lengthy contemplation. Next, your spells are quite powerful, especially when you take your age into consideration, but you must learn not to shout out the incantations of your spells. It leaves your opponent with a large advantage, as if one knows what curse is being used, one can easily counter it. I went easy on you this time-

Harry snorted in disbelief. His face was covered in tentacles, his legs were glued together, his robes were covered in scorch marks, his hand was broken, and he was generally in a lot of pain, having spent his time dodging potentially lethal hexes. If this was 'easy', then he'd be suicidal to suggest a 'difficult' duel.

"I went easy on you this time," repeated Thornbell with a glare, "as I didn't cast any spells wordlessly. I will wait until you drastically improve your artillery of curses before moving it up that extra level."

"Well that's good to know," muttered Harry wincing as he gingerly moved his wounded hand. "I may just live another couple of weeks in that case."

"We will meet again next week, same time. Understood?" She turned to leave.

"Hey! Wait a second! What about all these curses," said Harry in alarm, gesturing to his legs and face.

"Undo them yourself. It's good practise," said Thornbell unconcernedly.

"But what about my wand?" wailed Harry, slightly panicked.

"You'll get it back once you reach the common room," drawled Daisy.

"*WHAT!*"

"Well, with your gift of wandless magic, it shouldn't be a problem." With a last smirk, she swept out through the narrow doorway, her robes billowing behind her in an uncanny impression of Snape.

"Merlin, this sucks," stated Harry.

NN
NNN

A/N Hi again! I know, I know, it's taken me ages to update. Real life keeps getting in the way. Ah well, hope you enjoy this chapter despite the long wait! Review!

Genie05 the second: thanks for the encouragement and ideas. I agree, Not Myself is an amazing fic. I don't think I'll make Harry and Hermione get together, at least not long-term, but I'll think about it!

Vire: uh, well, Voldemort doesn't know about *all* the Slytherin passageways, only the chamber of secrets (which Harry does not know about at the moment). Thanks for letting me know about the confusion, I'll try and make it clear to everyone at some point. And don't worry, I am not going to make Harry ~~fall~~ madly in love with Draco, or Millicent Bulstrode.

Morrigan L. Evans: Thanks a lot for your review, it was really helpful. I'm slowly working through my first fic, correcting all the mistakes and adding small bits in, so I'll make sure the problems you mentioned will be changed. Thanks for letting me know! Oh, and I agree with you about the Harry/Ginny thing. I don't think I'll pair them up.

Anonymous: I know Ginny is acting very, er, emotional, but she *did* just get put into Slytherin, the ‘evil’ house, and got yelled at by her family. Don’t worry though, now that George and Fred have changed, she’ll calm down.

John Surber: Thanks for the review. I don't think I'll write a Ginny/Harry/Blaise pairing, but I might change my mind at some point. It is, as you said, quite original, and as I won't be having relationships for quite a while yet, I have plenty of time to think it over.

MoreDi: Yeah, I was debating on that angle for the Fred and George thing, but... well I thought they *had* been brought up as hard core Gryffindors so... 9Thanks for the review! It's always so amusing reading what you write.

Sdg: Good idea, thanks.

Smittened by Mauraunders: Thanks, it's always nice to get such an encouraging review.

Waytoobored: Of course, Harry and Draco will go out with more than one girl. Don't worry, I think Draco would be very OOC otherwise!